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Martin Bucer: Moderator of the Reformation



Reformiertes Forum

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Martin Bucer: Moderator of the Reformation

Dr. George M. Ella

One of the most important Reformation figures was undoubtedly Martin Bucer who was born in Alsace in 1491 and died at Cambridge in 1551. His status as Reforming leader is emphasised by the way he was treated after his death. When Mary the Bloody came to power in 1553, she imported a band of Italian thugs under their captain Cardinal Pole to symbolise her own triumph over the Reformation. Pole and his henchmen were given the task of holding a mock heresy trial over Bucer's grave and then pronouncing him guilty. After going through this shameful sham, they dug up the saint's remains, tied them to a stake, and piled Bucer's books around his bones. Then they set the morbid scene on fire. Mary, in her superstition, was now sure that she had quenched the Reformation in the heat of the flames.

Knowing where one stands with Bucer

Oddly enough, Bucer has been highly criticised for the long spiritual journey he made from Rome, via Erasmus and Luther until he became Calvin's mentor and the genius behind Calvin's work. "We never know where we stand with Bucer", is the quite unfounded complaint. Thus

some find Roman thoughts in him, some Lutheran and some Calvinistic. This is a strange way to tackle Bucer indeed. We must start at the beginning of Bucer's life and testimony and then follow him chronologically from youth to old age to see that though his early path was rough and ready and his steps wavering, Bucer became more and more sure-footed as he continued his heaven-bound pilgrimage until few were as competent as he in finding the way. Of his own retractions as he came nearer the truth, Bucer said,

"Because the Lord has given me to understand some places (of Scripture) more fully than I formerly did, which as it is so bountifully given me, why should I not impart it liberally to my brethren, and ingenuously declare the goodness of the Lord? What inconsistency is there in profiting in the work of salvation? And who, in this age, or in the last, has treated of the Scripture, and has not experienced, that, even in this study, one day is the scholar of another?"

It was this understanding of his own walk into the faith found in Christ that made Bucer the most moderate and tolerant of men and caused him to offer his entire life in striving to persuade all the different strands of the Reformation to learn and grow in grace together. Much of this work was long, hard and thankless

as he strove, with little success, to break down prejudices and the artificial, linguistic barriers between the Lutherans, the Zwinglians and later the Genevans.

Bucer was but also criticised for his development in theological understanding, but for a number of petty incidents that aroused the suspicion of his holier-than-thou fellow ministers. He was soundly criticised for publishing under his Latinised name, though this was the rule of the day and the leaders of his critics had Latinised or even fictive names. All expected Bucer to be more open and honest than others, as he certainly was! Bucer's first wife, like Luther's, had been a nun. This caused Bucer to be reviled by the Romanists. When his wife died of the plague and Bucer eventually remarried, this time a widow, criticism came from all religious quarters. It was claimed he had committed a double sin. He was now the husband of more than one wife and had gone against Scripture by marrying a widow. Bucer obviously did not allow such ill-use of the Scriptures and his reputation to influence him and when his second wife died, he married a third time!

Refereeing between Lutherans and Zwinglians

Bucer was an avid student from his birth onwards and, even as a child, he busied himself with a vast amount of reading, including the study of Greek and Hebrew. He read Erasmus fresh from the printer's and devoured Luther's earliest works with

great hunger. Though still very young, the Elector of the Palatine was so impressed by his religious devotion, great learning and eloquence that he made Bucer his chaplain and spiritual advisor. Being sent as a delegate to the Diet of Worms in 1521, Bucer spent several days in conversation and fellowship with Luther who expressed his great admiration for Bucer. The latter confessed that the meeting had deepened his trust in Christ. Three years later, we find Bucer in Strasburg bringing out a work with a number of Reformed preachers explaining why they had renounced popery. The young Reformer, however, soon came to abhor the hot-headedness and arrogance of Lutherans such as Brentius, who became notorious for his unfounded railings against those whom he called 'Zwinglians', whether the term fitted or not. We thus find Bucer writing in 1527 in defence of Zwingli's position. This made both Bucer's friends and enemies feel that he had swung from one extreme to the other. However, Bucer pointed out that whereas Luther read far too much into the Biblical doctrine of the Lord's Supper, Zwingli left a good deal out. This view did not stop him from defended both Luther and Zwingli whenever he felt they were wrongly accused. Bucer was never a party man. Sadly, especially at this time, Luther was, and he lost his former admiration for Bucer.

Bucer gains the fear but respect of Rome

Now Bucer was firmly established as a leading Reformer and represented the Strasburg church in 1529 at the Synod of Marburg. At Ratisbon he was chosen to confer with Henry VIII's ambassador the notorious Bishop Gardiner. Finding himself on the losing side if the argument, Gardiner worked himself into such a rage and used such violent language that the onlookers thought he was going to attack placid Bucer. Reporting on the conference, Cardinal Cantarene said concerning the reforming side:

"They have, among others, Martin Bucer, endowed with that excellency of learning both in theology and philosophy, and, besides, of that subtlety and happiness in disputation, that he alone may be set against all our learned men."

After a similar conference at Regensburg, John Groppar, ambassador to the Archbishop of Cologne, commented concerning Bucer:

"He was the fittest man in the world to reform religion, because he was not only very learned and exemplary in his life, but a great lover of peace and concord."

Bucer's part in the Eucharist controversy

At the Diet of Augsburg in 1530, Bucer again represented the church at Strasburg, showing that they had now gone furthest in their doctrines of justification by the work of Christ but also taught that the

faith thus given should be accompanied by charity. Bucer saw justification as being received into grace. He also openly argued for two ordinances only, namely baptism and the Lord's Supper. Bucer argued that the bread and wine in the Lord's Supper were not the very body and blood of Christ but that Christ nevertheless can be received in the feast spiritually and in faith. Thus, for Bucer, Christ's presence was in the believer only, not the unbeliever and not in the supposedly changed elements. For Luther, Christ was bodily present in the sacrament for believer and unbeliever alike. Bucer came near him by saying that Christ is there for the unbeliever, too, but to his condemnation. Luther wrote to the Frankfurt Senate, warning them of Bucer's interpretation, claiming that Bucer was double-tongued as he maintained that though Christ was present in the sacrament, it was not corporeally but spiritually. He thus pronounced Bucer to be in grave error. However, now the Zwinglians accused Bucer of Lutheranism as they themselves denied any presence of Christ whatsoever in the ordinance. As if all were invited except Christ! It soon became clear that the Reformation was in danger of losing its initial spirituality and Biblical nature through highly sophisticated reasoning from the Zwinglian and Lutheran, and later the Genevan, sides as to the symbolic value of ceremony, thoroughly ignoring the major doctrines which united them. Bucer complained:

"I am grieved, and not without reason, that we, to whom the Lord hath so bountifully revealed the other mysteries of his kingdom, have not been able, now in

thirty-four years, to agree concerning this most sacred and most general mystery, which all Christians ought to understand, as well as use.”

Bucer and the doctrines of grace

The Lutherans were, at this time, seriously departing, under Melancthon, from the doctrines of grace seen in predestination, election and perseverance. Concerning the controversy that ensued, Bucer said:

“Predestination, is neither more nor less than pre-limitation, or fore-appointment: And God, who consigns every thing to its proper use, worketh all things agreeably to its pre-determination; and, accordingly, separates one thing from another, so as to make each thing answer to its respective use. If you desire a more extensive definition of this predestination, take it thus; predestination is an appointment of every thing to its proper use; by which appointment, God doth, before he made them, even from eternity destine all things whatever to some certain and particular use. Hence it follows, that even wicked men are predestinated. For, as God forms them out of nothing, so he forms them to some determinate end: For he does all things, knowingly and wisely. The Lord hath made all things for himself, even the wicked for the day of evil. (Prov. 16:4). Divines, however, do not usually call this predestination; but, reprobation. ’Tis certain, that God makes a good use of evil itself: And every sin we commit, hath

something in it of the good work of God. Scripture does not hesitate to affirm, that there are some persons, whom God delivers over to a reprobate sense, and whom he forms for destruction: Why, therefore, should it be deemed derogatory from God, to assert, that he not only does this, but resolved beforehand to do it?”

Bucer was equally convinced that it is not possible to thwart the will of God, especially in salvation; that those who fall away were never of the elect; that God never loved the reprobate, but always loved the elect; and that God’s purposes must stand, not because of man’s works but solely because of “him that calleth” (Rom. 9:2).

Bucer’s name has a greater right than Calvin’s to be associated with the doctrines of grace

Erasmus Middleton in his *Biographia Evangelica* remarks, “If Bucer was not a Calvinist, where shall we find one?” The fact is that Bucer had reached this understanding of Scripture a good many years before Calvin. Indeed, whilst Calvin was still devotedly dealing with philosopher Seneca and his works, Bucer was outlining and expounding the very doctrines of grace which are now known as Calvinism. It is no difficult task to show that Calvin relied very heavily on Bucer’s commentaries on the gospels and Romans for his own later expositions and reproduced very much of Bucer in his Institutes, especially his teaching on the

doctrines of grace, the church and prayer. Indeed, not only did Bucer prove a direct main source of influence for Calvin, but Calvin's French mentors such as Lefèvre, Roussel and Farel were also influenced by Bucer and thus passed this influence on indirectly to Calvin. This caused Johann Sturm to say that everything that was good and pure in French religion came from Bucer. Indeed, in his well-argued book, *War against the Idols*, Carlos M.N. Eire shows that this war was won for the Swiss by Bucer in Strasburg before ever Calvin came on the scene. Thus Calvinism might just as well be called Bucerism, and the cradle, primary school and university of Genevan theology is to be found historically in Strasburg rather than Geneva. However, Calvin sharpened some of Bucer's points and drew them to an imagined logical and legal conclusion where Bucer would have pleaded caution. Calvin was also strongly influenced by Bucer's forms of worship during his own years of exile in Strasburg but, when he returned with power to Geneva, Calvin's followers openly denied that Calvin owed any debt to Bucer and, indeed, argued that Bucer had brought in a new form of popery. They had no eyes for any leader but Calvin, who thus became their pope.

The same truth but different attitudes to peace

Sadly, the situation is hardly better today. One can read through book after book with the title *The Theology of Calvin*, such as that of Wilhelm Niesel, and

not read so much as a mention of Calvin's dependence on Bucer. Francois Wendel of the University of Strasburg, is one of the few modern scholars to tackle this problem. Calvin denied that he had influenced his followers against Bucer in any way but it was impossible for him to say anything positive about Bucer without leaving a sting in its tail for him and a word of praise for himself. For instance, Calvin declared openly that though Bucer was a man of peace, he, himself, was a man of truth. Nobody in their right senses could thus accept Calvin's claim of innocence regarding his followers' harsh attitude to Bucer. Calvin did not notice the weakness in his own character here and wrote insultingly to Bucer, telling him that the bad reputation he had with the Genevans was his own fault and that suspicion would dwell on him until he came over to the Genevan side. Actually, the only major difference between Bucer and his pupil Calvin was that Bucer would never have written Calvin such presumptuous letters.

Calvinism injuriously so called

Obviously, there has been little reason to call Calvinism by that name: the Five Points neither originated with Calvin nor were compiled and reintroduced by him. We are to thank God for providing us with these doctrines in the Scriptures; the saints of old, including Calvin, for preserving them; and the Synod of Dort for codifying them. The best way to approach the doctrines of grace is as Cow-

per, the poet did. He wrote to his young kinsman John Johnson after persuading the student to drop Maths for Theology, saying:

“Life is too short to afford time even for serious trifles. Pursue what you know to be attainable, make truth your object and your studies will make you a wise man. Let your Divinity, if I may advise, be the Divinity of the glorious Reformation. I mean in contra-distinction to Arminianism and all the isms that were ever broached in this world of error and ignorance. The Divinity of the Reformation is called Calvinism but injuriously; it has been that of the Church of Christ in all ages; it is the Divinity of St. Paul and of St. Paul’s Master who met him in his way to Damascus.”

An invitation to join Cranmer’s international team of Reformers

In 1547-50, Archbishop Cranmer of England decided to invite the great Reformers of Europe to be the guests of the Reformed Church of England and help revise the Articles of Religion and book of Common Prayer. Cranmer had realised that the Continental Reformers had not worked together on defining the Reformation, and thus had not taken a common stand against Rome and worked together on a common statement of faith. He felt that confessions such as that of Augsburg were too insular to be considered as a pan-European creed. Bucer was entirely of Cranmer’s opinion and so

accepted the offer. He was made Professor of Divinity at Cambridge on a salary three times as high as his forerunner, out of respect for his great learning and expertise. Oddly enough, Calvin, who was still not considered one of the greatest of Reformed men and had not been invited, wrote a most busybodied and arrogant letter to Bucer, telling him how to behave in England and talking down to him as if he were acting as Calvin’s very junior officer, though Bucer was 18 years his senior and had far more experience of the Christian ministry. Calvin told his mentor, “You must free yourself from envy, which you know you labour under, without cause, among several persons” and “you must take care not to give the ignorant occasion to think ill of you, or a handle to the wicked to reproach you” As the Lutherans had, by this time made relatively large concessions in Bucer’s direction and the Anglicans were thrilled with Bucer’s thoroughly Reformed theology, the only envy seemed to come from Geneva. It is interesting to note that, once Bucer was out of the way, Calvin adopted, on the whole, the same stance that Bucer had held under Calvin’s criticism, though he remained more Lutheran than Bucer on the Lord’s Supper.

The Lord alone rules and disposes

Bucer spent two years at the most in England, before his life’s work ended. Nobody seems to know when he died but it must have been some time in 1551.

We do know that on his death bed John Bradford, soon to be martyred, and other friends of the Reformation told Bucer to arm himself against the assaults of the devil as death was approaching him. Bucer answered that he was wholly in Christ's hands and had thus nothing to do with the devil. "God forbid," he said, "that I should not now have experience of the sweet consolations of Christ." His very last words were "Ille, ille, regit, et moderatur omnia,' The Lord, the Lord

alone rules and disposes all things".

Bishop Burnett in his History of the Reformation summed up Bucer's character well when he said, "Bucer was inferior to none of all the Reformers in learning, but superior to most of them in an excellent temper of mind." Calvin, on hearing of Bucer's death, spoke of his disappointment at what Bucer, in his opinion, had not achieved, but did not refer to what Bucer, under God, had achieved. Calvin claimed that for himself.

The author



Dr. George M. Ella was born in England in February 1939, and as a teenager moved to Sweden to continue his training as a Forestry Apprentice. After his conversion he returned to England to study theology. Whilst at the London Bible College, he attended the worship services of the well-known Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones. Upon graduation at London and Hull Universities, he worked as a school teacher and evangelist among the Lapps. For the past 32 years Dr. Ella has lived in Germany, near the Dutch border. Now retired, his career included work as a Senior Civil Servant, university examiner and writer of curricula for librarian assistants and apprentice retailers for the state's commercial colleges. This work included editing and grading textbooks. After adding various external degrees and post-graduate qualifications in theology/literature, business studies, education, history, psychology and library science at Uppsala, Duisburg and Essen universities, he gained a doctorate in English Literature at Duisburg University. He has written a number of books prior to this volume, including works on William Cowper, James Hervey, John Gill, Andrew Fuller, William Huntington and Augustus Toplady. Dr. Ella was nominated for the John Pollock Award by Prof. Timothy George in 2001. A major work on the English Reformation Exiles under Mary I will appear shortly. Dr. Ella has authored numerous biographical essays and doctrinal studies which have appeared in magazines such as the Banner of Truth, the Banner of Sovereign Grace Truth, the English Churchman, the Baptist Quarterly, Focus, New Focus, the Bible League Quarterly, and the Evangelical Times.

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