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**Martin Bucer:  
Concerning the True  
Care of Souls**



Reformed Forum

**Reformiertes Forum**

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# Martin Bucer: Concerning the True Care of Souls

George M. Ella

Reformed interest in recent decades has mainly concentrated on the teaching of John Calvin (1509–1564) and Theodore Beza (1519–1605). Their mentors, Martin Bucer (1491–1551) of Strasbourg and Henry Bullinger of Zürich (1504–1575), though pioneer Reformers, are almost forgotten and their doctrines neglected. This neglect has often led to a severe misunderstanding concerning the origin and development of the Reformed faith. Bucer and Bullinger were seen traditionally as the fathers of what is now called doctrinal Calvinism and the theological foster-fathers of Calvin and Beza. The Genevans never attained to the scope and depth of their mentors' more irenic and thorough-going Reformed teaching. Bucer and Bullinger refused to sign the Melancthonian *Augsburg Confession* which Calvin and Beza accepted as Scriptural in all points. Calvin did sign the Reformed *Consensus Tigurinus* in 1549, after ten years of opposition to Reformed teaching, but rejected it at once under pressure from Beza who proposed a more Lutheran formula. Beza's ambiguity regarding the Lord's Supper left Cardinal Lorraine thinking that Rome and Geneva agreed. Calvin and Beza's understanding of the Word

of God and the Canon likened those of Luther and Zwingli and lacked the fullness and clarity of Bucer's and Bullinger's doctrine.

It was thus with great expectations that I opened my courtesy copy of Bucer's 'Von der wahren Seelsorge', translated under the new English title 'Concerning the True Care of Souls'. I pitched into the book at once. The late David Wright gives an excellent Historical Introduction to the background of Bucer's 1538 work, showing how Bucer was awakened in the birth-years of the Reformation and quickly took a leading part. When Calvin entered the field over a decade later he soon became a Buceran, moulding his thoughts, works, evangelical practice and teaching on Bucer's writings. Wright mentions the difficulties involved in understanding Bucer's quaint language and style but it was no different in 1538. When speaking at a Zürich conference that year, Bucer's fellow-members complained that he was incomprehensible. Being familiar with Bucer's original, I must praise Beale for doing a terrific work of translation. Bucer's Early New High German in its insular Strasbourg form is no easy code to break. Readers may download a full copy of Bucer's original

work at [http://hardenberg.jalb.de/display\\_dokument.php?elementId=10890](http://hardenberg.jalb.de/display_dokument.php?elementId=10890) free of charge.

Bucer's work starts with a definition of the Church showing that her rule must be by the Church and for the Church. He declared, 'We have separated from the Antichrist, not from anyone in authority over the Church,' finding his guidelines in the epistles to Timothy and Titus. He thus maintained that any secular rule is unscriptural. The Strasbourg Council eventually reacted to this by forcing Bucer into exile. In a Biblical form of church government, ministers must abide by the Word under Christ or be declared hirelings. Bucer sought for ministers who preached repentance and faith, essentials neglected by the papists. The author then deals with the fellowship and duties of Christians to one another and to the community at large, emphasising Christ's sole rule in His Church. Anyone who emphasises his own governing authority in the Church, Bucer claims, merely scatters the sheep. All pastors, teachers and carers of the poor must be appointed and commissioned by the congregation. The term elders, for Bucer, incorporates a wide variety of offices within the pastoral ministry. Some elders are to be chosen as bishops who elect further elders to their various appointments. He calls ministers to the poor, 'deacons, archdeacons and subdeacons', each with special tasks. There was no welfare state in those days. Bucer gives Bible sources and adds lengthy comments to back up what he is saying, stressing the pastoral

care expected of each office-bearer. His words on the care of wives for their husbands is a lovely mixture of Bible truths supported by common sense. English Reformer John Jewel recommended a plurality of bishops and elders in the local church but Bucer goes even further, imagining churches composed almost entirely of Christians actively engaged in the ministry. Though Bucer objects to secular rulers managing the church, he nevertheless had to require the presence of civic rulers at church elections. The Emperor liked to keep his eye on what was going on.

Bucer now goes on to outline what the principle work of pastoral care entails for the Church as a whole and for each member in particular. He sees this joint task as searching for the lost lambs; caring for the stray lambs; looking after injured sheep; strengthening weak sheep and guarding and feeding the sleek and strong sheep. Bucer then gives sound Biblical advice for each of these pastoral tasks. Chapter 12 is on Christian obedience and Chapter 13 provides a summary of the book. The two appendices are a note on married ministers by Robert Stupperich and one by Bucer on Church Guardians, a group of three members with special oversight over the ministry and church life.

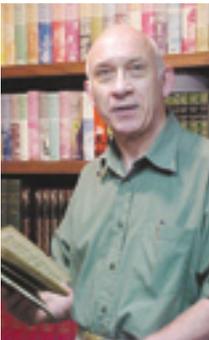
The translator helpfully refers regularly to the pagination in Stupperich's 1964 'official' critical edition. The natural English title, one would think, should be 'True Pastoral Care' as the book is concerned with shepherding.

Beale, Bucer-like, prefers what he calls an 'awkward' version. The translator drops his usual high style occasionally to use colloquial and stilted forms, probably caused by his use of the NIV, whereas the AV fits better into Bucer's phraseology and style when translating Scripture. In fact, the AV approaches modern speech, which it has influenced greatly, in grammar and syntax, often

far closer than the now antiquated NIV. So, too, the lack of index in a handbook of Christian instruction is a great weakness. These criticisms are only spots on the sun and the book is so good, so useful, so sturdy and so wonderfully cheap that though the eager Christian might have Calvin and Bullinger on his shelves, he ought to have Bucer in his pocket.

## The Author

### Über den Autor



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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