



'A good friend' — The life of Martin Bucer

One of the often neglected and misunderstood Reformers is Martin Bucer. It is hoped that just over five-hundred years after his birth, many will return to consider his life and writings. What follows is a survey of Bucer's early life, followed by a brief study of his close relationship to John Calvin.

Birth and early life

Martin Bucer was born on November 11, 1491 at Sélestat, Alsace, in what is today part of France. At the age of ten he was placed under his grandfather's care in nearby Strasbourg and remained there until he was fifteen, after which he returned to Sélestat to enter a Dominican monastery. He spent ten years there, where the only education he received turned out to consist of sophistry and the study of Aquinas, both of which he came to detest. It was not until he was 25 and transferred to the monastery at Heidelberg that he came under the humanists' influence. He became a devoted student of Greek and now possessed Erasmus' New Testament and a Hebrew Psalter.

In April 1518, just a few months after Luther's famous Theses were nailed to the door in Wittenberg, Luther was in Heidelberg for a Disputation. Bucer later wrote to Luther stating that it was through his speeches at this Disputation that he was converted. Bucer became devoted to the writings of Luther, especially the Reformer's commentary on Galatians, and he did all he could to have this reprinted and brought back to his native Sélestat. The break with the Dominicans was now inevitable and since he refused to submit to his superiors he fled the monastery and became a fugitive in 1521.

In 1522 Bucer married Elizabeth Silbereisen because he came to the conviction that clerical celibacy was unbiblical and that he did not possess the 'gift of celibacy'. In this Bucer led the way for other more leading Reformers, who began to take wives a year later. It should be remembered that Luther himself did not marry until 1525. Bucer arrived in the city of Strasbourg in 1523 where he was to spend his most industrious years for the cause of the Reformation (1523-1549). For it was Bucer who gave the evangelical clergy there the added strength to begin to move farther from the old ways.

At Strasbourg

On March 31, 1524 Martin Bucer became the first evangelical minister in Strasbourg when the parishioners of St Aurelie defied all higher authorities and chose Bucer as their Pastor. This set a pattern and later that year the magistrates began appointing other pastors. From this base Bucer was able to set forth a programme of reforming the church in Strasbourg.

There are many things we need to mention about these years of vigorous ministry Bucer carried out in Strasbourg. First of all, we must remember that Bucer did not always have a free hand in matters of reform as he needed the magistrates' support. Slowly, he won their support to rid the cathedral and other churches of images and idolatry. Secondly, it could never be said that Bucer did not take the ministry of hospitality seriously. This former refugee became an innkeeper to other Reformers in need of safety. We read of Lefevre and Farel finding refuge with him — not to mention Calvin, of whom we will say more shortly. It was Elizabeth on whom much of this burden of hospitality fell. They were never a rich family but Martin was always giving to friends in need and helping to provide lodging and food.

Thirdly, it must be remembered that all of this took place within the context of a life in which Bucer was corresponding with fellow Reformers throughout Europe — John á Lasco, Zwingli, Bullinger,

Calvin, Oecolampadius and Melanchthon. Fourthly, in addition to his correspondence, Bucer was travelling widely to attend Disputations and help formulate the faith and guide other cities in their Reformation. Finally, there was the local ministry in Strasbourg: setting up an educational system, being the spokesman of the clergy of Strasbourg, organising and reforming the church there, lecturing in the seminary, preparing books for publication, and being a father and husband.

Friendship with Calvin

Let us now turn to look at the relationship of Martin Bucer with John Calvin. The two men corresponded often before Calvin finally went to Strasbourg in 1538 as a refugee from Geneva. Calvin's ministry in Geneva had not been well received and Bucer proposed a means of support by having Calvin organise a French congregation in Strasbourg and lecture in the emerging university. We know that Calvin had an undying gratitude for Bucer's kindness, not just for providing a means of existence but in many other ways as well.

For instance, it was while at Strasbourg between 1538 and 1541 that Calvin began his prodigious labours as a theological writer. At Bucer's instigation he re-edited the *Psychopannychia* and in 1539, again following Bucer's suggestion, he wrote his famous reply to Cardinal Sadolet. In 1539 Calvin brought forth the second edition of his *Institutes* and also in that year published his first commentary on Romans. Calvin's Preface to Romans bears this glowing appreciation of his friend:

In the last place comes Bucer, who, by publishing his works, has given as it were the finishing stroke. For in addition to his recondite learning and enlarged knowledge of things, and to the clearness of his mind, and much reading and many other excellencies, in which he is hardly surpassed by any at this day, equalled by few and excelled by still fewer ... that no one in our age has been with so much labour engaged in the work of expounding Scripture.

Calvin wrote in the prefaces to other commentaries his indebtedness to and high regard for Bucer's writings. The 'Argument' to the Harmony of the Synoptic Gospels ends with these words:

So far from claiming the praise of having brought something new, I readily acknowledge, as becomes an honest man, that I have adopted this method in imitation of others. Bucer, a man of revered memory, and an eminent teacher of the Church of God, who above all others appears to me to have laboured successfully in this field, has especially been my model. As he availed himself of the labours of the ancients who had travelled this road before him, so my toils have been not a little alleviated by his industry and application. Where I use the liberty of differing from him (which I have freely done, whenever necessary), Bucer himself, if he were still an inhabitant of the earth, would not be displeased.

Hastings Eells, in his 1931 biography of Martin Bucer (since reprinted), characterises Bucer as essentially 'a good friend'. This is clearly reflected in Bucer's relationship with Calvin: on returning to Geneva the great Reformer wrote to his friend in Strasbourg:

'If in anything I do not respond to your hopes you know that I am under your power. Warn, chastise, do all that a father may do for his son'.

Writing to Bullinger of Bucer, Calvin later said: *'I will not mention in the present instance, the virtues both rare and many in which that man excels. But this much I will say, I would do the church of God serious injury, if I should either hate or despise him. And yet I love and honour him so much, that as often as it seems best I advise him freely'.*

These two men lived out the words of Scripture: *'A friend loveth at all times, and a brother is born for adversity'.*

The influence of Bucer on Calvin

Various writers have long drawn attention to Bucer's influence on Calvin regarding church order, discipline and worship; not to mention Bucer's emphasis on the Word and Spirit which is also

emphasised by Calvin. Calvin's liturgy used at Geneva following his return there in 1541 bears close resemblance to Bucer's Strasbourg liturgy. Calvin himself wrote: *'As for the prayers on Sunday, I took the Strasbourg form and borrowed the largest part from it'*. Eells noted that Calvin's *Maniere de Faire Prières*¹ was virtually identical in terms of the order of service to Bucer's *Psalter mit aller Kirchenubung*, and the prayers are mainly free translations from the Strasbourg liturgy. However, fewer writers have balanced these connections with the tremendous personal influence Bucer had on Calvin's domestic life. It was at the urging of Bucer that Calvin took a wife and in fact it was with Bucer's help that he settled upon Idolette de Bure in 1539.

Perhaps the greatest theological contribution which Bucer made, and which he imparted to his many disciples, chief of them Calvin, was in the teaching on the church. Bernard Reardon has argued that, *'none of the Reformers (only Calvin, again, excepted) disclosed so great an interest in the nature and constitution of the church as did Bucer'*. Bucer still speaks eloquently and persuasively today through such writings as *Of True Pastoral Care* and *De Regno Christi*. Perhaps our age needs more than ever to return to Bucer's writings on the church when the contemporary evangelical community appears to suffer from such confusion on this theme. He defined the church as a *'community (Gemeinschaft) in which the word and the sacraments, love and discipline (Zucht) prevail'*. Bucer's writings on the church are characterised by in-depth exegetical study combined with insights emanating from the heart of a pastor.

We should note the strength of Bucer's regard for Calvin, his dear friend in the true faith. When it became evident in 1541 that Geneva was sorry for dismissing Calvin and desirous to have him back, Bucer finally granted his departure. However, this was to Bucer's regret and he lamented it as a great loss to Strasbourg. He wrote a testimonial to Geneva of his thoughts on Calvin's return:

At last Calvin comes to you, and surely he appears to us to be at the present time an unequalled and most rare instrument of Christ in comparison with whom there is hardly an equal, if indeed there is an equal, especially if you consider zeal and industry for building up the church, and his gift for polemical writing.

The year 1541 was a difficult one for Bucer. Not only did he lose Calvin to Geneva but the plague took his wife and three of his children. He remarried the next year the widow of his dear friend Capito. Some opposed the marriage on the grounds that a clergyman should be the husband 'of one wife', but Bucer defended his action as scriptural. This second marriage turned out to be a true blessing and he wrote:

'Surely God has given men a suitable support in cares and labours; may he grant that I may be as serviceable and obliging to her, as I am convinced that she is to me'.

Closing years

In 1548 'The Augsburg Interim' came into effect under Charles V in an attempt to bring about religious unity in Germany. The Interim was heavily Roman Catholic in orientation and went far beyond Bucer's wishes as to unity and agreement. It was fundamentally contrary to the evangelical doctrine of Justification by faith. Attempts were made for Bucer's arrest but he managed to return to Strasbourg from Augsburg. Pressure mounted and slowly the clergy in Strasbourg gave in to the terms of the Interim. Bucer refused to wear the white surplice, seeing it as one step in a series of compromises to Catholicism. Finally, the Council of Strasbourg demanded in January 1549 that the preachers cease attacking the Interim. The result was that on March 1, 1549 Bucer was requested to leave Strasbourg. He preached his final sermon on March 3 and gave his last lecture on March 23. On April 6 he left Strasbourg forever.

Where was Bucer to go at the age of 58? Calvin invited him to Geneva. Myconius invited him to Basel. But the call which was most persistent came from England. Perhaps England offered a haven from the controversies of Germany and it did have a sympathetic king in Edward VI. There were also many noted theologians who could offer Bucer their company — Cranmer, Martyr, John a Lasco and others. Bucer accordingly came to England and was made Regius Professor of Theology at Cambridge. He continued to be consulted by many while in England, helping Cranmer revise the Second Prayer Book of Edward VI (1552). He also wrote his famous *De Regno Christi* in

1550, aware that the English Reformation was far from complete. His health continued to deteriorate while in England and after persistent sickness he died at Cambridge on March 1, 1551. An elaborate funeral was given and he was buried in Cambridge. Four years later, during the reign of Queen Mary, he was posthumously tried for heresy and his body was exhumed and burned. But four years after that, under the reign of Queen Elizabeth in 1560, a commission was appointed to restore his honour. We do well to recall with gratitude the life of this great Reformer a little over 500 years after his birth.

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¹ Old French: 'Manner of Saying Prayers'.