

# The Heritage of the Reformation

## Martin Bucer

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The Reformation did not come at the Catholic Church from outside. On the contrary, all the early Reformers except Calvin were Catholic priests and humanists, devoted to the church to which they had dedicated their lives. Since ordination they had said Mass regularly in Latin and fulfilled all the obligations of their high calling. I would like to say something today about the one who in his own day had the widest European influence, from Strasbourg to Stockholm and even as far as Cambridge, Martin Bucer, Fellow of St John's College and Regius Professor of Divinity. When he died in 1551, he was buried with honour in Great St Mary's Church; but in 1556 his body was exhumed and burnt, together with his writings, in the marketplace. Devoted students gathered up handfuls of dust and ashes; and then, in 1560, his remains were reinterred just inside the chancel on the right hand side, with the noble and unique inscription '*secundo funere honorante*' (honouring with a second funeral). It is worth a visit, even a pilgrimage; and I would like to give him a five-fold salute.

First, Bucer was the best educated of the Reformers. As a boy at a Latin grammar school in Alsace, he imbibed the Christian humanism of Erasmus; he became a teenage Dominican, not from vocation to the religious life but for a good grounding in the broad and deep natural theology of Aquinas; and he retained the best of what he had gained from both these places of learning and took it with him to university in Heidelberg and into the rest of his ministry and his ceaseless pursuit of agreement and reconciliation.

Reformers retained the characteristics they had acquired earlier: Luther stayed deeply, perhaps too deeply, Augustinian; Cranmer, Ridley and Latimer were destined to be Cambridge dons in episcopal orders; Nicholas von Amsdorf, the first Lutheran bishop, remained an amiable aristocrat; and Bucer, with his Dominican mastery of theology and debate and his wide culture, became an unparalleled interlocutor (*Gesprächspartner*) - capable of establishing common ground and debating with all comers. Contemporary ecumenism, too, needs dedicated scholarship; and the best way to celebrate Reformation 500 in Cambridge would be to establish a Martin Bucer Chair of Ecumenical Theology to serve both the Faculty and the Federation, and to reanimate the Centre for Ecumenical Studies.

Second, he was the originator of modern ecumenical method, always ready to travel at a time when travel was not tourism but torture, always ready to agree where agreement was possible, always ready to listen. One example. When he went to Ziegenhain to produce a Church Order for the scattered states of Landgraf Philip of Hesse, he found his problems compounded, not by Catholics, but by Baptists, widely denigrated as *Schwärmer*, or fanatics. He went to see their leaders, got them to sit down and heard them out. That might not strike us as unusual. In 1539 it was an astonishing innovation. The local Lutherans had only ever shouted at them - and they had shouted back. He listened to their grievances and did what he could to alleviate them, while giving no ground on the key issue of infant baptism.

Bucer paid equal attention to inner Protestant unity - German and Swiss - and to the quest for reconciliation with the Catholic Church, what we now call 'all-round ecumenism'. Though the forces tearing Christendom apart at the time were too strong for it, there will always be room for the 'find out where the trouble is and go and have lunch with it' school of diplomacy, as practised by him and Melancthon and the incomparable Cardinal Contarini.

Third, he was the first of the Reformers to marry openly, that is to say, to take the decisive action which jeopardised ecclesial and social standing, livelihood, even life and limb. In 1522 he wed a former nun, Elizabeth Silbereisen, by whom he had six children. She stayed with him through thick and thin until in 1541 she and four children succumbed to the plague in Strasbourg, leaving him with a disabled son. His friend and fellow reformer, Wolfgang Capito, also died, and the next year Bucer married his widow, the splendidly named Witbrandis Rosenblatt. She had been the widow, first of Oecolampadius, the Reformer of Basel, now of the Reformer of Strasbourg, and she was destined to be the widow of Bucer, whom she followed into exile in Cambridge. It must have been some comfort to her, in a country where neither she nor her husband spoke the language, to be received with *gut bürgerliche Küche* (German home cooking) by Margarethe Cranmer, wife of the first married Archbishop of Canterbury and a kinswoman of Andreas Osiander, the Reformer of Nürnberg. Spare a thought for these wonderful women, who risked so much, who endured so much and who loved so much. In our day, too, it is women who largely sustain the churches and the ecumenical movement. For example, they invented and still maintain the Women's World Day of Prayer, the oldest and one of the most effective of all ecumenical instruments.

Fourth, it would be good to be able to say that Bucer was popular here in Cambridge, but he wasn't entirely. The reason is that he insisted, as he had done in Strasbourg and everywhere else where he had the care of churches, on the need for discipline (*Kirchenzucht*). This did not endear him to undergraduates. A trace of that concern can be found in the Communion Service of the Book of Common Prayer: 'Brethren, in the primitive church there was a godly discipline' and 'until the said discipline be restored'. We may note the prevalence, in our even more undisciplined age of consumerist hedonism, not of godly but of bizarre and exaggerated forms of discipline, especially in the realms of diet and of fitness training, where people submit themselves to rigours from which any moderately competent novice-mistress or spiritual director would gently lead them away.

Finally, the Reformers were deeply christocentric (*solo Christo*), as indeed were the fathers of the Council of Trent. Bucer's magnum opus is entitled *De Regno Christi*. (F. D. Maurice, another great Cambridge ecumenist, at St Edward's Church just up the road, called his most lasting work *The Kingdom of Christ*, too). But Bucer, like contemporary Eastern Orthodox participants in the ecumenical movement, was also profoundly Trinitarian, constantly emphasising the activity of the Holy Spirit in all believers as the link between justification and sanctification, and between the love of God and the love of neighbour, and as the clue to a healthy and life-giving ecclesiology or doctrine of the church. At a time when the divine dynamic might seem to have moved from the historic churches of Europe and the Near East into the southern hemisphere and China, and into Independent and Pentecostal churches, we might look again at Bucer's trinitarian and pneumatological, rather than institutional and juridical, understanding of the church, which

deals incidentally with the relationship between territorial folk churches on the one hand and basis groups on the other, in his words *ecclesiae et ecclesiolae*. He didn't solve the problems, but then, neither have we. These five points - scholarship, ecumenism, the role of women, healthy life-style and ecclesiology - are all relevant in Europe today.

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