

# Martin Bucer

## Reforming church and community

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## Introduction

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Martin Bucer has not always been given his due in the country where he spent the last years of his life. Two editions of *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* have carried an article on him which fails to mention Strasbourg, where he worked for a quarter of a century – virtually his entire career as a Reformer.<sup>1</sup> A generation of Anglicans decreasingly appreciative of Thomas Cranmer's legacy is unlikely to be well informed about Bucer's contribution to the revised *Book of Common Prayer* of 1552.<sup>2</sup> Too few English church historians are aware that the most comprehensive blueprint for a Christian society produced anywhere in the sixteenth-century Reformation – not excepting Calvin's Geneva – was Bucer's *The Kingdom of Christ*, a late New Year gift for Edward VI in 1550.<sup>3</sup>

So it is gratifying to record that on 12 November 1991, a service in Great St Mary's, Cambridge, marked the quincentenary of the birth (on St Martin's Day, 11 November 1491) of Martin Bucer, one of the University's earliest Regius Professors of Divinity. And it is appropriate that Cambridge University Press, whose productive history stretches back a couple of decades before Bucer's Cambridge years, should publish a commemorative set of essays on the most distinguished continental Reformer to cross the Channel. They display something of his versatile contribution to English church reform,<sup>4</sup> but they bear chiefly on what he taught and did in his quest for an authentically Christian church community in Strasbourg and beyond. Herein lay a bundle of concerns that were nearest to Bucer's heart and most determinative of his distinctiveness among the magisterial Reformers.

Bucer's most recent biographer, Martin Greschat, has put it thus:

<sup>1</sup> Evans is similarly silent: see Evans 1985, p. xix.      <sup>2</sup> See Whitaker 1974.

<sup>3</sup> Translated in Pauck 1970, who notes (pp. 159–60) how directly Bucer addressed himself to the peculiarities of the English scene – religious, political, social, even economic.

<sup>4</sup> See also Wright 1992, and the same author's paper, 'Martin Bucer and England – and Scotland', in *Martin Bucer and Sixteenth Century Europe*, ed. C. Krieger and M. Lienhard (Leiden, 1993), vol. II, pp. 523–32. Bucer's influence in Scotland deserves treatment in its own right.

Bucer was fascinated by the vision of a truly Christian-ordered society, in whose creation state and church co-operated. But he did not simply reproduce the concept of the 'corpus christianum', but developed an ecclesiology which not only reckoned with the independence of the church but was also based on the personal responsibility of every Christian.<sup>5</sup>

It would be difficult to find a sixteenth-century churchman and theologian with more to say to the churches of Europe now living through the disorienting transition between the old order of the Christian establishment and the emergent ex-Christian (rather than post-Christian) pluralistic world.

Bucer was of an inexorably inclusivist cast of mind, and could not assent to the Radicals' narrowing of the church to fellowships of the committed. Nor, on the other hand, would he abandon the aspiration that the church in Strasbourg be a congregation of true believing, practising Christians. To this end he embarked on a remarkable attempt to develop 'Christian communities' – anticipations, it might be thought, of the Wesleyan class-meetings or today's house groups. But was it possible for a church to be both 'national and confessing'?<sup>6</sup> Bucer at least believed that it was not a hopeless endeavour. There are few more acute questions facing the church of the old world today – in the former Soviet Union's sphere of influence no less than in the West. Some will be tempted to retain their national character at the expense of their Christian identity, and others to retreat too readily into a minority that relishes persecution. Bucer's more complex, and indeed inconstant, vision demanded that one neither sat loose to the objective of embracing the whole population in the service of Christ nor was satisfied with what could be expected of an all-inclusive people's church.

The same tensions are encountered in Bucer's efforts to reunite the churches. No one took as seriously as this 'great theologian of dialogue'<sup>7</sup> the challenge of reconciling Catholics and Protestants in Germany. But he was by no means devoid of non-negotiable principles, even though in the interests of agreement many thought he stretched generosity and charity to the point of compromise. Two sharp essays in this collection reveal the subtle differentiations of his engagements with the Old Church.

The Bucer renaissance is now in full tide, with all three series in the collected edition of his writings making productive progress.<sup>8</sup> No doubt by the time of the 450th anniversary of his death scholars will have full access to a much larger body of material, especially letters and biblical commentaries. These present essays, several of whose authors are involved in the new edition, reflect in part the fresh impetus and light that it is already furnishing. They collectively pay tribute, in the language of his last adoptive country that he could not himself understand, to a Reformer who,

<sup>5</sup> Greschat 1990, p. 259.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. the popular presentation by Britton 1989.

<sup>7</sup> Greschat 1990, p. 258.

<sup>8</sup> For details see pp. xii–xiii.

precisely because he did not become the pride or the prey of any one school or tradition, deserves to be heard by all.

I wish to acknowledge the patience of Mr Alex Wright of Cambridge University Press, the typing services of May Hocking of the Department of Ecclesiastical History in New College, Edinburgh, the assistance of Martin Dotterweich with the proof-reading, and the hospitable facilities of the Center of Theological Inquiry in Princeton, New Jersey, where this volume was completed.

D. F. Wright