

MARTIN BUCER: "FANATIC OF UNITY"

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The description of Martin Bucer as a "fanatic of unity," or as we might say, an "ecumaniac," was that of one of his contemporaries, Margaret Blauer, member of a prominent Protestant family of that day, who called Bucer "the dear *politicus* and *fanaticus* of unity." With this assessment of Bucer, all scholars agree. John T. McNeill describes Bucer as "the most zealous exponent of the ideal of church unity of his age."¹ E. Gordon Rupp calls Bucer "the very model of a modern ecumenical."² David F. Wright, translator and editor of a recent, important volume of Bucer's writings, entitles his introductory essay, "Martin Bucer: Ecumenical Theologian."³

Throughout his ministry, this Reformed pastor and theologian spent much time and expended enormous energy on behalf of church union. In the interests of the unity of the church, he wrote much--books; letters to parties all over Europe; confessions intended to serve as the basis of union; and accounts and defenses of the proceedings at conferences where unity was the purpose. Bucer attended many such conferences, or colloquies, usually as one of the main participants. This required that he be endlessly on the road, tirelessly travelling all over Germany and Switzerland. Bucer spent a good part of his life in the saddle.

One simply cannot do justice to Bucer if he omits Bucer's pursuit of church union. Only when one takes into account this aspect of Bucer's ministry does he come to know the complete Bucer and only then does he have an eye for the full ministry of this many-sided, and sometimes surprising, Protestant theologian.

Bucer himself regarded his efforts for unity as one of his most important tasks, indeed as a sacred calling from God. When his zeal for unity was criticized as it was hotly and from every quarter, Bucer never apologized. "*Fanaticus of unity*" was for him not a condemnation, but commendation.

The conclusion of Bucer's ministry was fitting. At the end he was found in England, a Reformed theologian from Germany laboring in and for the Church of England. Thus his life's circumstances expressed one of the most outstanding features of Bucer's ministry as well as that which was dearest to the man's heart.

This aspect of Bucer's ministry takes on special significance in our ecumenical age. Protestants convinced of the necessity of church union point to Bucer as example and stimulus. The spirit that drove Bucer as well as the methods that he employed are held up for emulation. We may expect that as Bucer's works become available and as he becomes better known, his zeal and effort on behalf of church union will be emphasized even more. In his recent study of Bucer's efforts to reunite Protestantism and Roman Catholicism at Regensburg, Basil Hall concludes:

. . . attempts at a better understanding between "Catholic" and "Protestant" might well find a starting-point in the themes which lay behind the *Regensburg Book*.⁴

Bucer's Efforts for Church Unity

Bucer's later more pronounced attitude and more explicit efforts regarding church unity were foreshadowed already early in his ministry, in his dealings with the Anabaptists. In the 1520s Anabaptists flocked to Strasbourg from all over Europe, including some of the leaders--Carlstadt, Denck, Franck, Hubmeier, and others. Their purpose was not only to find refuge for themselves but also to establish their movement. They preached their doctrines to the citizenry of the city with the intent to proselytize Strasbourg. Bucer at first was tolerant of the Anabaptists and their views. He held conferences with these men, at which the Anabaptists were permitted to air and defend their errors in public, as though

they were a party standing on an equal footing with the orthodoxy of the Reformation. Bucer was conciliatory towards them, showing a readiness to make crucial doctrinal concessions to them. In 1524 he was willing to admit that Scripture does not require infant baptism and to allow baptism to be postponed until children reached the years of discretion. His purpose was to find accord with the Anabaptists or to win them to the faith of the Reformation.

In this Bucer was unsuccessful. Instead of gaining the Anabaptists for the Reformation, Bucer's tactics threatened the Protestant Church in Strasbourg. The Anabaptist tenets proved attractive to many of the people. Bucer's own colleague, and, next to Bucer himself, the most influential pastor of Strasbourg, Wolfgang Capito, was carried away by the Anabaptists and was in danger of being lost to the Reformed faith. Capito published a commentary on Hosea in 1527 in which he taught that the baptism of infants was unwise, advanced chiliastic notions, and exalted the inner word of the Holy Spirit above the written Word of Holy Scripture. Only by great effort did Bucer manage to deliver Capito from these doctrines and save him for the Reformation.

As a result, Bucer's attitude toward the Anabaptists hardened, and his approach to them changed. He more sharply condemned their errors and more vigorously defended the truths they denied, e.g., the covenant and infant baptism. Upon their refusal to recant their errors, the leaders of Anabaptism were banished from Strasbourg. It was, in part, because of the threat to the Protestant Church in Strasbourg from Anabaptism that Bucer came to see the need for church government, including excommunication, by a body of elders.

One interesting aspect of the controversy between Bucer and the Anabaptists, which also brings out the similarity between 16th century Anabaptism and present-day neo-Pentecostalism, concerned the Anabaptists' teaching of perfectionism. Appealing to I John 3:6 ("Whosoever abideth in him sinneth not"), the Anabaptists asserted that true Christians can live sinless lives. Bucer responded that this position is refuted by the Fifth Petition of the Lord's Prayer,

“Forgive us our debts. . . .” One of the Anabaptists replied that this is the prayer of man before the Holy Spirit is poured out and that he himself could not pray this petition without lying.

Despite Bucer’s subsequent condemnation of Anabaptism and his own sound teaching on the issues at stake in the controversy with Anabaptism (the covenant, infant baptism, the divine institution of the magistrate, the sole authority of Scripture, predestination, and the church), twenty-five years later, when Bucer was banished from Strasbourg, some in the Strasbourg Church accused him of “enthusiasm,” i.e., of being infected with Anabaptist notions.

The difference between Bucer’s handling of the “left wing of the Reformation” and Luther’s handling of it at about the same time is unmistakable. Luther immediately saw the fundamental, irreconcilable differences between the faith of the Reformation and that of the Anabaptists. He saw too that the success of the doctrines and practices of Anabaptism would mean the death of the Protestant Reformation. In fact, for Luther the evil of “enthusiasm” was as great as that of Roman Catholicism. Therefore, Luther’s meeting in Wittenberg with the leaders of Anabaptism was not on the order of a conference, but a confrontation. To their advocacy of their “Holy Spirit” apart from and above the Scripture, Luther was quite unconciliatory, snapping, “*Ihren Geist haue er uber die Schnauze.*” Already in 1525, in his *Against the Heavenly Prophets*, Luther drew the lines of antithesis clearly and sharply between the Protestant Reformation and the Anabaptist movement:

The Spirit, the Spirit, the Spirit [is the refrain of the Anabaptists--DJE]. . . But should you ask how one gains access to this same lofty spirit they do not refer you to the outward gospel but to some imaginary realm, saying: Remain in “self abstraction” where I now am and you will have the same experience. A heavenly voice will come, and God himself will speak to you. . . . I want to warn everyone truly and fraternally to beware of Dr. Karlstadt and his prophets, for two reasons. First, because they run about and teach, without a call. . . . The second

reason is that these prophets avoid, run away from, and are silent about the main points of Christian doctrine. . . .⁵

The results were that Wittenberg was not troubled by the influences of the Anabaptists and many Protestants outside Wittenberg were preserved from this movement.

On the other hand, it should be noted, as David F. Wright points out, that

Bucer achieved the only mass recovery of Anabaptists into the established Church in the whole of the sixteenth century. It happened in 1538 in Hesse. . . , when he was summoned by Philip to curb the Anabaptist expansion that had defied all previous measures of control. Hundreds of dissenters rejoined the Church of Hesse as a result of a series of debates conducted in a pleasingly calm atmosphere in which Bucer evinced a readiness to learn as well as teach.⁶

The Unity of Protestantism

The first real program of Bucer for church unity concerned the unity of the Protestant church. From about 1525 the Protestant church was dividing into two distinct and hostile bodies. The one church-body was the Lutheran, having its center of influence in Wittenberg and its leaders in Luther and Melancthon. The other was the Reformed church, having its center first in Zurich and then in Geneva, with Zwingli and Calvin as its leading theologians. The issue that divided Protestantism was the doctrine of the Lord's Supper, particularly the manner of the presence of Christ in the Supper. Luther insisted on a physical presence. Zwingli held a merely symbolical presence. Bucer and Calvin taught a spiritual presence, which doctrine eventually became the creedal teaching of the Reformed church.⁷

Efforts to unite Lutherans and Zwinglians climaxed at the Marburg Colloquy of 1529. The dramatic failure of union at Marburg marked the permanent division of Protestantism into Lutheran and Reformed branches. Although a moving force in calling the Colloquy, Bucer was rather a spectator

than a participant at this conference. The chief spokesmen were Luther and Melanchthon, on the one side, and Zwingli and Oecolampadius, on the other. Agreement was found on all main points of doctrine except the doctrine of the Supper; but this one difference divided the Protestants, inasmuch that Luther refused Zwingli the right hand of fellowship, alleging that the Swiss had "another Spirit than we."

Whereas for the others Marburg sealed Protestantism's division, for Bucer it was the occasion for tremendous, almost frenzied, and from a certain point of view, heroic efforts to achieve the union of the divided churches and preachers. For some ten years Bucer poured himself into a self-chosen mission: to make peace between Lutherans and Zwinglians; and in carrying out this mission the Strasbourg Reformer "offered" himself, to use Paul's expression in Philippians 2:17. These efforts culminated at the Wittenberg Conference of 1536. By this time Zwingli and Oecolampadius were dead. Zwingli's successor, Bullinger, refused to attend the conference. Bucer, therefore, took it upon himself to represent the cause of the Zwinglians, although other representatives of the Zwinglian view were also present. Luther and Melanchthon argued the Lutheran position on the Lord's Supper. The outcome was a document of concord in which Bucer, both for himself personally and for the Zwinglians, expressed agreement with Luther's doctrine of the physical presence in its three basic aspects: the substantial presence of Christ's body in the bread; the taking of Christ's body by the communicant with the mouth; and the reception of the body and blood of Christ by the unworthy. The "Articles or Formula of Concord" read as follows:

1 . . .with the bread and the wine the body and blood of Christ are truly and substantially present and presented and received. . . .

3 . . .the Lord's body and blood are truly offered to the unworthy also, and. . .the unworthy receive them when the words and institution of Christ are observed. . . .⁸

In his own explanation and defense of the "Concord," Bucer wrote:

We all granted that on account of the sacramental union that exists between the bread and Christ's body it could be said. . .that the Lord's body is there received into our very hands, mouth, and stomach.⁹

This was total capitulation to Luther's doctrine of the Supper, and a betrayal, for the sake of unity, of that which Bucer knew to be the truth of the Supper. Bucer was not, in fact, converted to Luther's view whatsoever. Later writings show clearly that Bucer repudiated Luther's doctrine of a physical presence. But Bucer signed the formula for the sake of peace. What makes this even more inexcusable for Bucer is that from the outset of the conference Luther laid down what he called "hard terms." First, Bucer and his associates must publicly recant their previous errors on the Supper. Second, they must promise to teach the people "that in the holy Supper the true body and true blood of Christ is truly had and received even by the mouth, and that no less by the wicked than the good."¹⁰ Understandably, Luther was suspicious of Bucer's willingness to assent to the "hard terms" and to sign the articles of concord. Before he would receive Bucer and the Zwinglians as brothers on the basis of the "Concord," Luther interrogated each one individually, whether he truly believed the physical presence of Christ in the Supper.

Although Bucer exerted himself with might and main for some two years to gain the acceptance of the Wittenberg Concord by Bullinger and the main body of Zwinglians, he failed. The reason was obvious. As one writer has put it, "Zurich was not about to swallow the Lutheran camel." The concord was spurious. No union of Lutherans and Reformed was accomplished by it. Bucer's reputation sank, if not stank, among the Zwinglians.

Protestant and Roman Catholic Reunion

As though to prove that his zeal for church unity was no incidental characteristic and that his readiness to compromise for the sake of unity was no temporary aberration, Bucer plunged himself into the treacherous waters of Protestant and Roman Catholic reunion. Although his main work

for the union of Protestantism and Roman Catholicism followed the failure of his efforts for internal Protestant unity during the years 1539-1541, Bucer had been working for the reunion of Protestantism and Roman Catholicism since 1530. In 1530 he was present at the Diet of Augsburg, where in the interests of his empire, Emperor Charles V was attempting to reconcile Lutherans and Roman Catholics. Bucer and the other representatives of what might be called the Reformed churches were not allowed to sign the Lutheran Augsburg Confession, drawn up by Philip Melancthon, unless they subscribed, it in its entirety; and since they could not agree with the crucial article on the Lord's Supper, they might not put their names on that creed. Therefore, with the help of the Capito and Hedio, Bucer drew up his own confession to present to the Emperor--The Tetrapolitan Confession, or Confession of the Four Cities. This was the first confession of Reformed churches in Germany. As Bucer himself later admitted, this creed was deliberately vague on the doctrine of the Supper, in the interests of peace. It merely stated that in the Sacrament the true body and blood of Christ are truly given to eat and drink:

. . .with singular zeal they [the men of the Four Cities--DJE] always publish this goodness of Christ to his people, whereby no less today than at that last Supper, to all those who sincerely have given their names among his disciples and receive this Supper according to his institution, he deigns to give his true body and true blood to be truly eaten and drunk for the food and drink of souls. . . [Chapter XVIII, "Of the Eucharist"].¹¹

As was the case also with the Augsburg Confession, the creed did not criticize Rome's doctrine of transubstantiation, although Chapter XIX, "The Mass," did sharply condemn Rome's doctrine of a repetition of the sacrifice of Christ for sins, as well as Rome's teaching that the celebration of the Supper is a meritorious work. Nor did the Tetrapolitana give expression to Bucer's differences with Luther's doctrine of the physical presence. David F. Wright is correct when he says that "the article on the eucharist was irenic, but characterized by that evasive weakness for which Bucer was to gain

such an unhappy renown,"¹² although this judgment ought to be tempered by a recognition of Bucer's inclusion in the article, however subtly, of the distinctively Reformed confession that the body and blood of Christ are received only by the believer:

“. . .this goodness of Christ to his people. . .to all those who sincerely have given their names among his disciples and receive this Supper according to his institution. . . .”

Nothing came of Bucer's efforts for unity at Augsburg. Indeed, his creed was not even read before the Diet.

In 1534 and 1535, Bucer accepted an invitation to submit “position-papers” for a conference of Protestant and Roman Catholic theologians proposed by King Francis I of France to resolve differences between the churches. Bucer was optimistic about such a conference, envisioning the possibility of Protestant and Roman Catholic reunion: “Bucer was enthusiastic: he could not hear of a reunion movement without the excitement of a noble hound on the scent.”¹³ Bucer's “position-papers” conceded so much to Rome as to make it a matter of gratitude to God that the proposed conference never came off. They granted papal supremacy; accepted the authority of the Fathers and of the canons of the early church as the basis of discussion; and virtually concealed the fact and importance of the doctrinal differences between Rome and Protestantism.

It was at the Diet of Regensburg in 1541 that Bucer made his supreme attempt to unify the entire Christian Church; and it was at this meeting that “the compromising Bucer,” as Philip Schaff calls him, outdid himself in giving up the truth and manipulating formulations of doctrine, for the sake of the desired unity. A preliminary conference was held at Worms in 1540. Here, Bucer and Capito entered into secret negotiations with a team of Roman Catholics, in order to draw up articles of agreement that would serve as the basis of discussion at Regensburg the following year. The result was the *Regensburg Book*, a “draft basis of theological agreement at the Colloquy to be held during the imperial Diet at Regensburg in the following year.”¹⁴ In the *Book*,

Bucer made the most serious concessions to Rome, particularly on the vital doctrine of justification. Luther to whom the *Book* was sent in the hope of his approval, blasted it: "We hate the book worse than a dog or a snake." He referred to it as "that utterly wretched book."

The forecast of compromise in the *Regensburg Book* was fully realized at the Diet of Regensburg. The Diet was a significant meeting. It was summoned by the Emperor, who needed the unity of his Protestant and Roman Catholic citizens for his political ends. The Emperor himself attended. Prominent, powerful men represented both church bodies. Bucer, Melancthon, and Pistorius represented the Protestants; and Gropper, Eck, and Cardinal Contarini, the Roman Catholic Church. John Calvin, at that time exiled in Strasbourg, accompanied Bucer and witnessed the proceedings. A mighty effort was made from both sides to reunite the church bodies. Regensburg was the "high-water mark of reconciliation between Catholic and Protestant, not only in the Reformation period, but perhaps in the whole pre-Vatican II era."¹⁵

Bucer compromised the Faith of the Reformation. He agreed to a statement on justification that did not affirm justification by faith alone, but rather spoke of justification as both the imputation of righteousness and the infusion of righteousness. He approved the declaration that the church is the authoritative interpreter of Scripture. He authored a draft article that taught transubstantiation:

We affirm that the Lord's body is truly present but that the bread is converted or changed by a mystical change whereby there is now brought about after the consecration a true presentation of the body that is present. And we understand this mystical change to be not merely of significatory import but one whereby Christ's body becomes present.¹⁶

Bucer went so far as to acknowledge that the sacramental adoration of Christ in the bread of the Supper need not be rejected as a matter of principle, i.e., he sanctioned that worship of the host which the Heidelberg Catechism calls

“an accursed idolatry.”¹⁷

Despite all this well-nigh incredible compromise on the part of the Protestants, as well as an approach to Protestant formulations on the part of the Roman Catholic participants that drew the ire of their more rigid colleagues, the Regensburg Colloquy failed to accomplish the desired reunion, largely because of the adamant opposition of Luther in Wittenberg and of the Pope in Rome. “In those troubled waters the ark which Gropper and Bucer launched sank almost without trace.”¹⁸ But a storm of criticism fell upon the head of Martin Bucer from all quarters of Protestantism. Calvin faulted his spiritual mentor, and at the time his earthly host, for his “ambiguous and dissimulating formulae concerning transubstantiation.” An irate Luther said, “Bucer, the rascal, has absolutely lost all my confidence. I shall never trust him again; he has betrayed me too often.” On another occasion Luther remarked, “Bucer stinks sufficiently on his own account because of the Regensburg Articles.”

By his readiness to go to these ends to gain unity, Bucer earned for himself, in his own day, the opprobrious title, “fanatic of unity.”

Judgment About These Efforts

Exercising that Christian virtue which was dear to the Strasbourg Reformer--charity--as fully as is commensurate with honesty, let us recognize several factors that mitigate our judgment about Bucer's fanaticism for unity. First, Bucer's irenic spirit undoubtedly rooted in a heartfelt love for the one Body of Christ and in a sincere grief over her divisions, as Bucer saw them. Wilhelm Pauck observes that “communion was his great ideal,” quoting Bucer:

Nobody truly knows Christ who does not feel the necessity of a communion, of mutual care and discipline among his members. . . . Christ suffered and taught for no other purpose but that we should be one and embrace each other with the same love with which he embraced us, and that we should seek our common salvation with the same

eagerness with which he sought ours.¹⁹

Feeling this “necessity of a communion,” Bucer abhorred strife and division. He once wrote, “If we cannot agree, we are not of Christ.” He went on to speak of the apostle Paul’s tireless labors on behalf of the communion of the saints and concluded, “Now another spirit is at the helm, which flees all union.”²⁰ Early in his ministry Bucer set himself a policy of peace:

Right from the time when I first conceived the way of godliness, not from commentaries composed by men but from the Scriptures themselves through the teaching of the Spirit, I purposed at heart both to esteem nothing more highly than love and to keep as far distant as possible from party passions and contentions, especially in matters of religion. . . . Nothing can less benefit the servant of God than favouring sectarianism and indulging in disputes which dispel the truth, sow envy and malice, and occasion the total shipwreck of the whole of true authentic Christianity. . . . So I took pains to keep out of disputes, by leaving the ungodly to flourish unchallenged and by refusing to cast pearls before swine, by instructing the weaker brethren in a spirit of peace and by tendering an open ear and mind to brethren more richly endowed with the divine wisdom of the Scriptures. In this way I thought I could avoid any possibility of being diverted into strife and dissension. . . .²¹

In keeping with his ideal of communion among the people of God, Bucer desired that the saints love one another. He wrote: “My aim is. . . that Christians should recognize and embrace each other in love.”²² Luther noticed this in Bucer and on one occasion complained that whenever anyone disagreed with Bucer, Bucer would accuse him of a lack of love.

It surely has to be one of church history’s supreme ironies that when Bucer’s body was about to be exhumed for burning, upon the coming to power in England of Mary Tudor, the sermon that was preached to condemn him took for its text Psalm 133, “Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for

brethren to dwell together in unity!," in order to damn Bucer as a violator of this unity!

Second, Bucer himself firmly maintained the great Reformation doctrines, even when for the sake of unity he was compromising them in the formulas of unity that he was devising. After all the efforts at unity had failed and even Bucer had seen the hopelessness of his cause, he wrote sound expositions and strong defenses of the Reformed Faith, sharply condemning the errors of both Rome and Lutheranism. Even while he was compromising the truth Bucer usually, if not invariably, did so by way of ambiguous phrases, so that Bucer, at least, could still understand the concession in a sound sense. An example of this is his concession to Luther at the Wittenberg Conference of 1536 that the unworthy eat and drink Christ's body and blood in the Supper. Bucer created a distinction in his own mind between the unbelieving ungodly and unworthy believers. By the unworthy who still eat Christ's body Bucer would understand as the unworthy *believers*. He knew full well, of course, that Luther meant, and supposed that Bucer also meant, the unbelieving *ungodly*. Bucer's personal steadfastness in the truth was manifested at the end of his life by his rejection of the Interim of Augsburg which required acceptance of Roman Catholic worship, even though the price he paid was banishment from Strasbourg and exile from Germany.

Third, regarding Bucer's attempt to make peace between Lutherans and Zwinglians in the matter of the Lord's Supper, men ought to have labored long and hard to heal the breach. That division within Protestantism was, in fact, a grievous event--separating very brothers, giving the Roman Catholic adversaries of the Reformation occasion to blaspheme, and seemingly hindering the great work of the increase of the Word of God. Besides, Bucer really did see that Luther's deepest concern for a real presence of Christ in the Supper did not require the physical presence that Luther opted for. He saw also that Luther's demand for a physical presence of Christ actually contradicted Luther's own basic doctrine that salvation is by faith, and by faith only, and, therefore, is for the believer, and for the believer only.

Luther's own gospel denied that salvation is by mouth, or for everyone with an open mouth at Communion. More than once, as Luther was pouring out his fury on Bucer's doctrine of a spiritual presence and a spiritual partaking, Bucer responded as he did in 1524, in this *Grund und Ursach*: "Dr. M. Luther himself always directed our gaze toward the Spirit and to faith, as he has in fact written." There is something noble about Bucer's dogged pursuit of a Protestant peace when many of the parties were settling comfortably into their divided state.

Nevertheless, Bucer's zeal for unity, like the Jews' zeal of God mentioned in Romans 10:2, was not according to knowledge. It was fanatical--frenzied, foolish, fired by feeling. For this reason it was dangerous. Still worse, in its practice Bucer's zeal for unity was wicked. It falls under the judgment of God's Word. First, it is not men's communion with each other, but the saints' communion with God that is paramount. Not our love for each other, but our love for God is primary. "Thou shalt love the LORD thy God" is the first and great commandment, not "thou shalt love thy neighbor." This love for God is expressed in the love of His truth; and communion with Him consists of the fellowship of the Word and doctrine. John T. McNeill is wrong, therefore, to defend Bucer by asserting that "he need not be thought unprincipled because he put the principle of charity before that of theological rectitude."²³

Bucer compromised God's truth, endeavoring to create peace at the expense of the truth. For this, in the second place, the judgment of God's Word falls upon Bucer's efforts at church unity. It is painful for a Reformed man to relate that the Roman Catholic historian, Joseph Lortz, excoriated the "conciliatory theology" of those who were laboring for the reunion of Protestantism and Roman Catholicism at Regensburg, with particular reference to Martin Bucer. In his important work, *The Reformation in Germany*, Lortz harshly condemns the theological relativism that prevailed at the conferences of the Protestants and Roman Catholics during the period 1539-1541:

It was perfectly logical that the most active centres of conciliation should have come to be--on the Protestant side--those territories where the a-dogmatic standpoint inherited from humanistic relativism, was most in evidence.²⁴

Lortz is searing in his indictment of Bucer:

Martin Bucer. . . was a humanist. His accommodating tendencies in politics were in harmony with his mediatorial ideas in the sphere of Church and theology. This theological humanist sought to achieve utter simplification--beginning with himself. He was completely relativistic, and with him theological distinctions lost all weight. He was a disaster for Protestantism, for he was unable to avoid this relativism. . . . And so the notion that dogmatic distinctions were irrelevant gained more and more ground. . . .²⁵

One need not accept this judgment upon Bucer to agree with Lortz that, at the conferences at Hagenau, Worms, and Regensburg in 1540 and 1541, "the truth. . . has become in some degree the object of negotiation."²⁶ This was an attack on God's Name and worship; and it was a threat to the Reformation itself. Besides, it was powerless to effect any genuine unity, for true unity is the unity of faith, i.e., the unity of the doctrine of Holy Scripture.

In contrast to Bucer, Luther and Calvin clearly saw the evil of compromise for the sake of unity. At the time of the conference at Augsburg in 1530, Luther wrote Melanchthon, who was also afflicted with the willingness to surrender truth for peace: "You must not give up any more of the truth. . . To my mind, you have given up too much already. The truth is not yours to give up, but God's." In 1538, in a letter to Bucer, Calvin criticized Bucer's concessions to Luther in the interests of Protestant unity. Bucer, wrote Calvin, "had yielded too much to Luther, who mingled ambition with his piety, instead of seeking 'a sincere concord in the pure Word of God.'"²⁷ On another occasion, Calvin gave Bucer a stinging rebuke:

If you want a Christ Who is acceptable to all, you must not fabricate a new gospel for that purpose.²⁸

Thirdly, Bucer placed too much emphasis upon the organizational aspect of church unity; and he depended far too much, therefore, upon man's shrewd efforts to achieve it. If only Bucer could hammer out a formula, if only he could get all parties to sign a document, churches previously divided would be united. Therefore, Bucer resorted to deliberate ambiguity, equivocation, and tortured qualifications that rather concealed differences than revealed oneness. He was not above sheer dishonesty. Once, having been authorized to translate a book of Luther's sermons, Bucer inserted his own views on the Lord's Supper, in order to manufacture agreement between Lutherans and Zwinglians before the Protestant public. This enraged Luther. To the end of his life, Luther bitterly complained of Bucer's treachery: ". . .first [Bucer wrote]. . .a virulent and sacrilegious preface, then in noxious notes he has crucified my work."²⁹

The extremes to which Bucer would go in making distinctions and qualifications, supposedly to clarify, but actually leaving all in a state of bewilderment, is apparent in Bucer's definition of the word "truly" in the context of the presence of Christ's body in the Supper, at an important conference:

I believe that by virtue of the words, "this is my body," the body of the Lord is truly [that is, substantially and essentially, but not quantitatively or locally, that is, substantially and really, but not in measure of size or quality or measurement of the place] in the Supper, is present and is given.³⁰

Worldly statesmen appreciated Bucer's methods. Chancellor Bruck praised him: ". . .among all the theologians now living, Bucer is truly an excellent man for negotiating in theological affairs after the manner of the world,"³¹ damning praise for a Reformed theologian. The admiration of the shrewd Cardinal Contarini for Bucer's "subtlety and ingenuity" at the Diet of Regensburg was similar:

The Germans also have Martin Bucer, a man deeply learned in the principles of theology and philosophy, and in disputation he shows such subtlety and ingenuity, that all by himself he was able to withstand our doctors.³²

These same methods were odious to the Protestant theologians. Bullinger coined the word "bucelize"--a verb meaning "to equivocate, to deceive, to play ecclesiastical politics." Even Bucer's dependency on conferences for producing unity must be faulted, inasmuch as this replaced dependency upon the Holy Spirit working unity by the truth. Again, it was Luther who saw this flaw in the innumerable conferences and exclaimed, "I care nothing for diets and councils, believe nothing, hope nothing, think nothing--Vanity of vanities!"

Fourthly, Bucer's exertions on behalf of church unity were tainted by political motivations (which is not to say that these were selfish, or self-seeking, motivations on Bucer's part). In those days church unity was desirable to the princes for the sake of political union and their own earthly advantage. Bucer, a close friend and chief advisor of Philip, the Landgrave of Hesse, allowed himself to be used by Philip for Philip's political ends in the matter of seeking the unity of Protestants. The conferences that sought the reunion of Roman Catholics and Protestants, at which Bucer played a leading role,

were deeply involved in the oppositions of imperial, papal and French politics. . . . Charles [V, Emperor--DJE] greatly needed a settlement in the Empire [on account of France and the Turks--DJE], which meant a religious settlement, in order to meet these political challenges.³³

"Not all was pristine purity at Hagenau, Worms, or Regensburg, the sites of the colloquies," writes Hans J. Hillerbrand.

Over the colloquies hovered a peculiar mixture of political and religious considerations, and the former may even have been more important than the latter. The emperor considered religious concord in Germany to be of utmost importance for his political plans. . . .³⁴

To permit political motives to intrude upon a seeking of the unity of the Church is to corrupt a spiritual enterprise with carnal considerations. Invariably this proves fatal to the spiritual enterprise. Worse still, when the gospel is made to serve the ambitions of princes, Christ is prostituted to the whims and pleasures of the rulers of this world.

Lessons for Our Time

The divisions in the visible church that Bucer vainly tried to heal were real, significant divisions, due to serious departure from the truth of the Word of God--the division between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism; the division between the Reformation church and Anabaptism; and also the division between the Reformed church and Lutheranism. These divisions could not be healed slightly by Bucer's methods. It would have been detrimental to, indeed destructive of, the Reformed faith, if Bucer had healed the divisions by his methods. Although division in the church is grievous and although those responsible for the division will bear their judgment, Jesus Christ Himself is the cause of division, in the offense of His truth and gospel: "So there was a division among the people because of him" (John 7:43).

The fanaticism of Bucer for unity reminds us of the weakness of man, including good and godly men, so that we never put our confidence in ecclesiastical princes, but in God only, as He is revealed in Scripture. Nor do we commit ourselves unconditionally to the guidance of any man, no matter how highly we otherwise esteem him, but only to the guidance of the Holy Spirit given in the Bible. In seeking the unity of the church, as in all else: *sola scriptura!*

The lessons to be learned from Bucer's efforts for unity are timely for the Reformed at the end of the twentieth century. Ours is the ecumenical age. Reformed churches are pursuing unity with the very same religious bodies to which Bucer gave his attention. Alliances are sought and formed with the spiritual descendants of Anabaptism--Baptists, fundamentalists, and especially the charismatics. Rome is wooing all the Christian churches, and the Reformed are not

showing themselves impervious to Rome's blandishments. The Reformed and the Lutherans are holding conferences that seek, and find, unity.³⁵

The passion that Bucer had for unity is in evidence today. If Bucer spent much of his ministry in the saddle, many a modern churchman spends much of his time in airplanes, jetting to and from conferences, committee meetings, and church assemblies, the purpose of which is church unity.

All of Bucer's errors are resurrected. Unity is viewed as the supreme calling and goal of the Christian church, overriding "theological rectitude." Sound doctrine is compromised, or simply ignored. Union is created by formulas that conceal division and by negotiations that rival those of the politicians in cleverness and evasiveness. One may suspect that behind much of the ecumenicity are political ends.

The calling of Reformed men and churches is not to despise unity and peace, for the unity of the church is the precious work of the Holy Spirit of Christ. The believer is to esteem unity and to endeavor to keep it (Eph. 4:1ff.). The church must manifest the true unity and catholicity of the Church on earth as far as that is possible. But the Reformed church must rejoice in the spiritual unity of the church that the Spirit makes a reality, despite all appearances to the contrary; she must pray for, and labor towards, the manifestation of this unity on the basis of the truth, without any compromise; and she must reject all spurious unity, as well as all Christ-less unity-efforts.

As so often, Martin Luther said it well. When Bucer met him at Coberg in 1529, after the Marburg Colloquy with its final rupture between Lutherans and Zwinglians, observing Bucer's despondency over the division and his desperation for union, Luther gently chided the Reformed Pastor of Strasbourg:

Martin, Martin, are you really serious? It's better for you to have us as your enemies than to set up a merely fictitious fellowship.³⁶

ENDNOTES

1. John T. McNeill, *Unitive Protestantism: The Ecumenical Spirit and Its Persistent Expression* (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1964) 144.
2. Quoted in *Common Places of Martin Bucer*, David F. Wright, tr. and ed. (Appleford, Abingdon, Berkshire, England: The Sutton Courtenay Press, 1972) 14. Hereafter: Wright, *Martin Bucer*.
3. Wright, *Martin Bucer*, 15-71.
4. Basil Hall, "The Colloquies Between Catholics and Protestants, 1539-41," in: *Councils and Assemblies*, Volume 7 of *Studies in Church History*, G. J. Cuming and Derek Baker, editors (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1971) 266.
5. Martin Luther, in: *Luther's Works*, Volume 40 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1958) 147, 222.
6. Wright, *Martin Bucer*, 31.
7. On the controversy within Protestantism over the doctrine of the Lord's Supper, particularly the role and teaching of Martin Bucer, cf. David J. Engelsma, "Martin Bucer's 'Calvinistic' Doctrine of the Lord's Supper," *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 3:2 (Fall, 1987) 169-195.
8. Wright, *Martin Bucer*, 362-363.
9. Wright, *Martin Bucer*, 359.
10. Hastings Eells, *Martin Bucer* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1931) 198-199.
11. The Tetrapolitan Confession of 1530 (Confession of the Four Cities, Strasburg, Constance, Memmingen and Lindau. Wherein They Set Forth Their Faith to His Imperial Majesty in the Diet of Augsburg.) in: *Reformed Confessions of the 16th Century*, Arthur C. Cochrane, ed. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1966) 54-88.
12. Wright, *Martin Bucer*, 35.
13. McNeill, *Unitive Protestantism*, 165.

14. Wright, *Martin Bucer*, 42.
15. Wright, *Martin Bucer*, 44.
16. Wright, *Martin Bucer*, 45.
17. Question 80: “. . .the mass teaches. . .that Christ is bodily under the form of bread and wine, and therefore is to be worshipped in them; so that the mass, at bottom, is nothing else than. . .an accursed idolatry.”
18. Hall, “Colloquies,” 266.
19. Wilhelm Pauck, *The Heritage of the Reformation* (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press of Glencoe, Inc., 1961) 85-99.
20. Pauck, *Heritage*, 98.
21. Quoted in Wright, *Martin Bucer*, 33. Bucer wrote this in 1526.
22. Pauck, *Heritage*, 97.
23. McNeill, *Unitive Protestantism*, 147.
24. Joseph Lortz, *The Reformation in Germany*, tr. by Ronald Walls, Volume 2 (London: Darton, Longman & Todd; New York: Herder and Herder, 1968) 254.
25. Lortz, *The Reformation in Germany*, Volume 1, 340.
26. Lortz, *The Reformation in Germany*, Volume 2, 254-255.
27. McNeill, *Unitive Protestantism*, 181. In accounting for Bucer's concessions to Luther, one should not discount the factor of Luther's powerful, personal influence. David C. Steinmetz remarks that “even such an experienced ecclesiastical politician as Martin Bucer could be reduced to putty when Luther turned on the full force of his personality.” Cf. *Luther in Context* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986) 113.
28. Letter of Calvin to Bucer, January 12, 1538. Quoted in Pauck, *Heritage*, 89.
29. Quoted in Eells, *Martin Bucer*, 81.

30. Quoted in Hastings Eells, "The failure of church unification efforts during the German Reformed (1529-1555)." *Archive for Reformation History*. (42, (1951)) 164.
31. Eells, *Martin Bucer*, 255.
32. Eells, *Martin Bucer*, 293.
33. Hall, "Colloquies," 237, 245.
34. Hans J. Hillerbrand, *The World of the Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981) 99.
35. Between 1962 and 1966 Lutheran and Reformed theologians held "theological conversations" under the auspices of the North American Area of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches Holding the Presbyterian Order and of the U.S.A. National Committee of the Lutheran World Federation. In addition to the churches represented by these organizations, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, the Christian Reformed Church, and the Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod participated in the conferences. At the final session the participants adopted the statement that they "have recognized in each other's teachings a common understanding of the Gospel and have concluded that the issues which divided the two major branches of the Reformation can no longer be regarded as constituting obstacles to mutual understanding and fellowship." The papers read at the conferences were published as *Marburg Revisited: A reexamination of Lutheran and Reformed Traditions* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Augsburg Publishing House, 1966). The quotation given above appears in the "Preface." The mediating role of Bucer in the controversy between Lutherans and Reformed did not go unnoticed at the conferences (cf. pages 44-45).
36. Martin Luther's "Table Talk" in: *Luther's Works*, Volume 54 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967) 196.