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God, positive fruit in previous centuries. But today we are living in a post-Christian era, in a context that is more and more similar to that which was in the first century.

We do however note that there is everywhere a movement of the multitudinist churches towards the style of confessing churches which, [p. 29](#) at present represent 'numerically the largest group within Protestantism' (E. Brunner). Theology, the messenger and interpreter of the *logos theou* can hasten an evolution that is certainly in accordance with God's plan. [p. 30](#)

Bucer: National and Confessing Church

Neil Britton

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I do not think that most Evangelicals would support the idea of a national church where converts could not together pray and study the Bible, witness and serve the Lord in his Church and in the world. The question is rather whether a truly biblical faith can be lived out in a national church. In this regard, we can study with benefit the ecclesiology of one of the Reformers who sought during his ministry to combine the idea of a national *and* a confessing church; namely Martin Bucer of Strasbourg, whose ministry lasted there from 1521 to 1549 (he died in 1551).

His ecclesiology requires structures that are *at the same time* national and confessing. In Strasbourg, the Reformation had handed the Church over to the city from the hands of the bishop, while at the same time integrating the civil authorities into ecclesiastical responsibilities.

The national church came into being in Strasbourg. It is here that Bucer sought to put into practice his vision of the church, re-working the medieval concept of the 'corpus christianum', applying it first of all to the tangible, daily reality, capable of being observed in everyday life. It is also here that the ministry of the Church was realized, namely teaching, pastoring and the diaconate, from which the true church community takes root. It includes all those who are baptised (including children, because for Bucer their baptism is paralleled in the OT, with circumcision being the symbol of belonging to the people of God). Within this territory there is:

a) the school, promoting and consolidating the Reformation and organizing a renewed church, Bucer required each believer to have the possibility of learning during his youth Hebrew and Greek in order to read Scripture in its original tongue, to allow the Holy Spirit to speak rather than to promote the teaching of the ancient languages. The school was first of all a training in church life before being a training in the reading of literature, the study of science and the practice of art. It was not the Church but a training ground for membership in the Church. [p. 31](#)

b) The parish. This became under Bucer the community where the ministry of each individual believer was exercised, and the corner stone of the National Church structure. It was the normal cell in the 'multitudinist' system in which all the baptised were to be found. As every citizen was a member of a family or guild, so every baptised person was a member of a parish, where the teaching of doctrine, exhortation, discipline and the

hearing of the Word took place. It was the primary community, where teaching took place during the liturgy, the catechism of children and young people. Like Luther Bucer recognised the importance of singing and its potential for teaching. However the parish was not the only place where the Christian faith was taught, since for Bucer it could not be a confessing community. These other places were to be situated not outside the parish but inside it and yet distinct from it.

Confessing communities (Gemeinschaften) were therefore necessary: one such was the family, a 'little community', where education and edification could take place. The parish structure being too large, Bucer argued, and the National Church gathering being insufficient for the nature of true Christians, the teaching of doctrine being impossible to limit to Sunday worship, the possibility must be offered for each member of the parish 'to decide once and for all if he wants to live as a "Christian" '. This nurture was offered in these *Gemeinschaften* (referred to henceforth as 'house groups'). The Church, according to Bucer, 'will not be happy to hear the Word of God preached because it is not the hearers but the doers who will be saved'. For these doers other places are required, not just the parish but a gathering of more limited members, *privata collegia*; these are indispensable to the life of the Church. His conception of the church is therefore a *corpus mixtura* open to all, and at the same time a 'communio sanctorum' of those who confess 'truly the Christ, and who are a minority of mature, spiritual, solid Christians, growing up in the multitudinist field (*Volkskirche*) and justifying the existence of the latter'. Discipline and excommunication was to be exercised only in the context of the house groups, a proposal that from the outset caused concern to the civil authorities as well as to many pastors, who divided themselves into two camps, those for and those against. (This was one of the reasons that provoked the exile of Bucer in England and the failure of the house group in Strasbourg.)

What was the cause of the foundation of the house groups? Essentially, it was the political situation, as well as laxity on the part of the civil authorities—the political situation was the spark that set alight What he had always been teaching. p. 32

Because we have failed in making the Church more of a confessing church we are now like Israel under certain prophets under God's wrath. We are in the time of Jeremiah where God handed over his people, temple and city into the hands of the enemy and where a remnant of believers implored God to be gracious by means of their fasting, prayers, supplications and all kinds of good works. This small remnant, by recognising the people's error, saved it from perishing. (*Letter to the Church in Bonn*, 1547).

How did he create them? 1) By preaching the need to live a truly corporate Christian life, 2) by asking those who heard the call and responded to meet at a suitable place and at an hour clearly indicated after having been visited at home by the pastor, 3) by insisting that during this first meeting, the pastor should instruct them concerning the true Christian life and each should express his own intentions, 4) by ruling that all should choose from within their number two or three leaders who would form a committee responsible for teaching and disciplinary oversight together with the pastor and a representative of the city authorities (*Kirchenpfleger*), 5) by stipulating that the pastor should testify before these 'elders' as to the soundness of his teaching and commit himself together with the whole group to respect those in authority, the elders should do the same in return, and the names of the elders should be recorded in a register.

Once the superstructure was created, the group had to be constituted: 1) the pastor and the newly-elected elders summoned each participant at the first meeting and held a conversation with him (and with all his household) on the subject of sound doctrine, the sacraments, Christian ethics, and penitential discipline; 2) the head of the household, if he

was ready and willing, committed himself to them by the right hand of fellowship and was inscribed in the register.

What were the aims of the house groups? Doctrinal teaching and pastoral care; growth in piety, where the Christian 'will no longer live for himself but for the Lord'; where will be practiced penitence, absolution and excommunication. In them 'God will live, because they will be the body of Christ, his bride, his reign in which we also will be able to live according to his commandments and serve him.' They will be therefore the '*ecclesiola in ecclesia*' realizing in themselves the professing requirements of the community of the elect in the primitive Church.

Teaching was not just the work of the pastor in the pulpit but a brotherly exchange in which participants had the right to speak, question and propose. It was the place where the priesthood of all believers was practised, where lay inspiration might find expression, where adults, baptised and confirmed in the National Church, might [p. 33](#) undergo continuous training. Holy communion being the sacrament of the confessing community (baptism being that of the 'multitude'), an examination, freely accepted by all concerned, was necessary in the house groups before each celebration. Here the ministry of exhortation was exercised. Excommunication according to [Matt. 18](#) was therefore necessary but was practised only in the house groups where penitential discipline in private could be exercised. Sharing material possessions was the complement of spiritual fellowship. (This was a theme that concerned all the Reformers as well as the dissidents, on account of the wealth of the traditional church; and appeal was often made to [Acts 2:44-47](#) and [4:32-35](#).)

A '*Kirchenpfleger*' was one of the elders of each house group. Because the house groups were in the parish and not apart from it, the state had its representative in them. But he was not to hinder the house group in any way from being the body of Christ. In time, with other pressing duties laid upon town authorities, this part of their responsibility lapsed.

What were the reasons for the failure of the house groups? First, it was objected that they were sectarian. To this Bucer replied: sects propagate doctrines opposed to the word of God, refuse to submit them to the Church, and proselytize among native people; finally they separate themselves from others. Bucer explains that there are three categories in the city: those who accept membership of a house group, those who attend worship and the sacraments but who are not yet ready to take the step of joining a house group, and those who (unfortunately according to Bucer, the largest 'heap' [sic!] in the city) who come to nothing at all. Bucer explains that the house groups are not trying to set apart a kind of pure Christian but rather they seek to attract by their example those who are less advanced. The members of the house group must therefore remain in union with the parish, participate in worship and not celebrate holy communion in their houses, as this would be in fact sectarian.

It was objected that the house groups questioned civil authority, and it was also objected that the time was not ripe for this development anyway. Bucer's reply was that the Scripture requires house groups in the Church. Consideration of practicability was purely secondary. It was said that there was division among the ranks of the pastors. But the only point at issue was the biblical manner of working with the authorities of the state.

More serious was the evolution of the house groups during the short span of their existence in Strasbourg. Instead of being, as was originally intended, a form of new life for the Church as a whole, they [p. 34](#) became a place for the individual Christian to be instructed without any reference to corporate Christian living, so that they became places of individual elitism, rather than centres of loving worship and service for the entire Church. We can therefore summarize Bucer's ecclesiology as being that of a national *and* a confessing Church. The members of the house groups were not alongside the parish, nor

in a tenuous relation to it, nor opposed to it, nor separated from it, but within it. This is what kept them from being sectarian. Their failure is to be regretted.

BUCER TODAY

In his insistence on the reality and the beauty of the Church, Bucer is almost a high churchman before his time. He almost goes so far as to say that the Church is a sacrament of the incarnation. Though he lacks a marked theology of the cross as an element in the life of the believer and of the Christian community, his emphasis is a wholesome one; especially for reformed Christians, who often are not very sensitive to the beauty and the glory of the Church as she is presented in Scripture. The Church in the writings of Bucer is situated between that which is so identified with the world that she loses her identity, and that which is so separated from the world that she is no longer faithful to the will of God as shown in the parable of the wheat and the tares.

In his insistence on the unity of the Church, Bucer was open to other Reformation groups. One hears little of the polemic against others who differed from him and yet with whom he had much in common. For him, being a Protestant is not an aim in itself but a means of promoting the Reformation of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. And he insisted on the importance of the training of the laity. Lay people were, for Bucer, contrary to the view of the civic authorities, competent to discuss matters of doctrine.

BUCER'S INFLUENCE

'It was Bucer's idea which, under Calvin's name, was spread abroad in Geneva and from there throughout the world. Bucer as Calvin's model in his thought and his activity must be placed where he has the right to be placed as far as the development of reformed thinking is concerned' (Jacques Courvoisier: 'La notion de l'église chez Bucer').

Philipp Jakob Spener, the founder of Pietism, was inspired by Bucer's 'Von der Kirche Mangel und Fehl'—he printed and used it to support his creation of '*collegia pietatis*'. Bonhoeffer, in his 'Sanctorum [p. 35](#) Communio', affirms many Bucerian ideas. To quote another thinker: 'I choose the example of the Protestant Church in Strasbourg as one of the wisest of the entire Reformation, as the one that we would commend from the very first as a model of discipline.' (J. Bossuet, 1691 ... who was not after all very gentle in his attitude to Protestant Christians).

Can we however continue to affirm our allegiance to a National Church today and remain faithful to Scripture and to our Lord? One of the reasons for remaining in a National Church, which I often heard during my university days, and which has since been severely criticised among evangelical Anglicans since Keele, is that National Churches are often 'the best boats to fish from'. It is true that evangelicals are not members of such churches purely by accident or by human choice and they must give good account of themselves as faithful sons of their own particular tradition. But in Switzerland recently, during a referendum on the separation of the Church and State in those cantons where a church is still a state church, more than 70% of the population voted to maintain the status quo. Sociologists will continue to study the reasons for this attitude but can evangelical Christians, concerned for evangelism and witness, ignore this openly expressed wish? I think not.

Secession from a National Church should be considered only when continued membership is incompatible with faithfulness to Scripture. In the Church of England, there is a Bishop of Durham who does not believe in the corporeal resurrection of Jesus. The Archbishop of Canterbury seemed to be saying recently that all religions could

possibly lead to God when he prayed with representatives of other faiths in Assisi. But the Church of England has not *officially* rejected her Reformation principles enshrined in her charter. Until she does this, and until other National Churches do so officially, it seems to me that there is no reason to abandon ship. Further, a National Church is in a unique position to be the conscience of the nation. In Switzerland, the pastor is often invited to speak to the entire town or village, and this is an unparalleled opportunity of reminding the populace of the requirements of our creator God.

The arguments of Bucer are of course typical of Christians in what we have come to call Christendom. We now live in what is acknowledged to be a post-Christian era. Do we still need National Churches? It is clear that they can be justified only where the State is anxious to fulfil its responsibilities as servants of God in the light of [Rom. 13](#). In fact, we are seeing most National Churches becoming progressively more confessing. To the best of my knowledge there is [p. 36](#) no national Church that does not practice infant baptism. Is there not a good reason in the light of the present day post-Christian situation, where many non-believers require baptism for their children out of tradition, for those who believe that the baptism of children is biblical to refrain from baptising them as a form of witness?

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The Church in Europe

Peter Cotterell

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INTRODUCTION

There is general agreement that the Church in Europe is in a poor state of health. It is not difficult to find statistics to support that contention: for example it is said that some 1.8 million people in Europe leave the Church each year.¹ This appears to mean that according to some system of counting church members or church attendance there is a net decline each year of 1.8 million. Even if we accept the figure of 300 million as representing the total nominal membership of the European churches it is clear that such an enormous defection cannot long be sustained without seriously undermining the effectiveness of the Church's outreach.

Nor must we be lulled into a sense of security by the developments within the House Church movement, or the proliferation of conferences which attract thousands of people. These features of contemporary life are, in fact, the visible evidence of the malaise within the churches, an unheard protest against the general irrelevance of what passes for

¹ Press release from the Association for the Promotion of Church Growth in Europe, now the European Church Growth Association, ECGA, January, 1987.