

STRANGE MEDICINE: RETRIEVING MARTIN BUCER'S UNDERSTANDING OF PENANCE

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Forgiveness is one of the central acts of the Christian life. That centrality consists in both the act that God has done in Christ and also in who the Christian community is in light of that act as we bear witness to it. Jesus' gathered momentum and attracted conflict in response to the seemingly simple claim, "Your sins are forgiven" (Matthew 9:2). Christian identity pivots upon willingness to admit need of forgiveness: "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8). Moreover, in the Lord's Prayer Jesus states that our own appropriation of the forgiveness extended to us stands in relation to our ability to forgive others: "And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Matthew 6:12). While the Christian life is more than forgiveness, the biblical witness testifies to us that it cannot be less.

The significance of forgiveness in the Christian life also means that it is vulnerable to distortion, misunderstanding, and even corruption. Forgiveness is detached from other doctrines within theology, scriptural witness to forgiveness is decontextualized from the full counsel of the Word of God, and pastoral wisdom about forgiveness devolves into platitudes or even become cover for abuse. Because of this importance and vulnerability, forgiveness is a truth and an act that requires care and consideration within the local church. Sitting at the convergence of the biblical text, the tradition of the church's doctrine, the practice of forgiveness within the local congregation, and the complexities of the persons who receive and give grace in relationship to one another, the pastor-theologian should call upon all the resources at his or her disposal in order to steward this mystery well.

Thankfully, the pastor-theologian has a growing number of resources for this task. Recent years have seen the arrival of a number of significant studies on forgiveness, including L. Gregory Jones' *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis*,² Miroslav Volf's *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*,³ and Shults and

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² L. Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995).

³ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2019).

Sandage's *The Faces of Forgiveness: Searching for Wholeness and Salvation*.⁴ These studies, which have called for more attention to the theological, cultural and psychological aspects of forgiveness, provide insight for pastors to shepherd disciples into deeper faithfulness and formation for forgiveness.

And yet there is a significant lacuna in these studies. As each study explores the dynamics of forgiveness, there is an almost exclusive focus upon the forgiver. In each of the titles listed above, the preponderance of the argument is devoted to providing a framework and resources to enable an offended, sinned-against party to forgive the offending sinner. In this emphasis, little attention is given to the one seeking forgiveness and their formation. This lacuna exists in part because of an important distinction in most contemporary explorations of the topic between forgiveness and reconciliation. The former refers to the offended's decision and intention to extend forgiveness to the offender. The latter refers to the acknowledgement of sin by the offender and the attempt of a restored relationship between offender and offended. Forgiveness is an act that is commanded at all times as a part of Christian witness, but reconciliation is contingent upon both the offender and the offended, and perhaps receives less attention because of that contingency.

Given the need to protect those who have been hurt and also the contingent nature of reconciliation in comparison to forgiveness, it is understandable why attention is focused upon the forgiver. But within the local church, the pastor-theologian bears a responsibility not only to the formation of a forgiving people but also the formation of offenders who ask for and receive forgiveness. Attention has rightly been given to the importance of virtues such as humility and empathy in forgivers.⁵ But how should pastors consider their shepherding and discipleship responsibilities to offenders?

In answer to this question, we will turn to a less contemporary and perhaps unlikely source from the Great Tradition. In 1538, Martin Bucer wrote a book of pastoral instruction for the care of God's people in the church entitled *Concerning the True Care of Souls*. The volume is remarkable for many reasons, not least for the typology of the spiritual states of men and women in the church and the responsibility of pastor to each. But what is most noteworthy and germane to our purposes is the extended attention Bucer gives to the care and formation of what contemporary theology would call 'offenders.' Bucer's thoughts can provide wisdom for pastors and the local church, as it seeks to become a place where those who give forgiveness and those who ask for forgiveness can live together in greater peace and flourishing.

⁴ F. LerRon Shults and Steven J. Sandage, *The Faces of Forgiveness: Searching for Wholeness and Salvation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003).

⁵ Shults and Sandage, *The Faces of Forgiveness*, 58.

I. CONCERNING THE TRUE CARE OF SOULS

Martin Bucer's *Concerning the True Care of Souls*⁶ is rightly considered a classic of pastoral theology from the Reformation tradition. Though it is a relatively small work, Bucer gives his readers an ecclesiology, an account of the ascended Christ's reign extended through ordained ministers, and a description of the various ministries of the local church. The rest of the work is an extended meditation on the metaphor of a pastor as a shepherd to the various sheep who make up the Body of Christ. Those sheep may be, alternately, lost, stray, hurt and wounded, weak, and finally healthy and strong. Each type of sheep requires different care from the pastor, and Bucer gives guidance concerning each case.

The greatest amount of attention by far is given to those sheep that Bucer describes as "hurt and wounded." But what Bucer means by this is perhaps counterintuitive to modern ears. These sheep are not those who have been sinned *against*, but precisely those sheep who have *sinned*. "They are those who remain in the church and communion of Christ, but fall into open and notorious sins and abuses, such as abandoning their confession of Christ, denying the truth of Christ, and in other ways blaspheming against God, his holy word and all the things of God; disobedience and sin against superiors; any harm done to their neighbors' property, person or honour by word or by deed; all immorality and intemperance."⁷ This penultimate part of the description—"any harm done to their neighbor's property, person or honour"—places the 'hurt and wounded' in the category of that we have earlier named as "offenders."

Bucer begins his chapter on the care of hurt and wounded sheep with an exhortation to the entire church community generally and the ordained leadership specifically to be diligent in this task. "In the first place it is the responsibility of all Christians, for Christ must after all live and do his work in every Christian, but the ones who are principally to devote themselves to this work are those who have been specially appointed to provide care of souls and medicine for sins."⁸ This places the task of caring for offending members squarely within the responsibility of the local church. This naked statement is perhaps unremarkable; most local congregations would aspire to tend to their members with this kind of attention. But what is significant about Bucer's argument is the kind of medicine that he believes should be given to those who are hurt and wounded.

Bucer describes the nature of that medicine as his argument proceeds: "This medicine is nothing else than getting the one who has sinned to recognize his sin sufficiently to cause and move him to a position of true acknowledgement regret and sorrow for his sin; and in this way going on to comfort him again and strengthen his hope of grace, so that he may be

⁶ Martin Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, trans. Peter Beale (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2009).

⁷ Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, 98–99.

⁸ Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, 99.

enthusiastic and desirous of true reformation.”⁹ What Bucer is describing here is more than verbal acknowledgment of sin and hurt. This “medicine” reaches past external behavior to the emotional and moral formation of the offender. “The sinner has not been won back until he has been moved and brought to the point of saying: ‘I have sinned, I desire grace, I want to reform,’ and is really struck down and humiliated because of his sin; but also comforted again in Christ and has become entirely eager and passionate about putting everything right.”¹⁰ Bucer’s language here is attuned to the moral formation of offenders and the kinds of dispositions that pastoral care seeks to nurture in these men and women.

The attentive reader has already discerned that Bucer believes that a crucial aspect of pastoral work is the formation of offenders in a way that mirrors the attention modern theologians and psychologists to forgiveness in those who have been sinned against. Where Shults and Sandage have rightly drawn attention to the need to cultivate humility and empathy in Christians as a way of forming a community who forgives, Bucer makes a complementary argument about how those who ought to *seek* forgiveness should be formed. In order to better understand Bucer’s argument, we must answer two questions: How does Bucer propose the church cultivate the proper virtues in offenders, and what virtues does Bucer identify as important in offenders?

The answer to the first of these questions brings us to the aspect of Bucer’s work that throws his thought into stark relief in comparison to other Reformed theologians. Bucer advocates for the practice of *penance* within the local congregation as a way of forming and cultivate. Penance, understood broadly, is a series of acts that accompany repentance for sin that is considered particularly grievous. What makes penance different than simple repentance is that these acts are prescribed by ecclesial authorities as means to the end of reconciliation with the greater church body. During the Reformation era penance was a disputed topic, and many Reformed figures believed that it was a practice that should be dispensed with completely. Penance was at the very least a source of confusion about the efficacy of the completed work of Christ for the Christian and at most it was idolatrous or abusive. But in contrast to many of his contemporaries Bucer sought to reclaim what he understood to be important and valuable essentials to the practice that should be preserved in spite of the dangers associated with its use in the church. Bucer sees penance as mandated within the testimony of Scripture: “[Penance] was commanded and required by Christ, and not just a human ordinance.”¹¹

Bucer’s case for penance follows both biblical and historical lines. On the one hand, Bucer understands Paul’s instruction at various places in his letters to be indicative of penance. Central to his argument is Jesus’ statement to Peter in Matthew 16:19: “I will give you the keys to the kingdom

⁹ Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, 101.

¹⁰ Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, 102.

¹¹ Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, 108.

of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” Additionally, he cites 1 Timothy 5:20, 2 Corinthians 2:6–8, 2 Corinthians 12:20–21, and 1 Corinthians 5:2 (alongside various Old Testament narrative texts) as examples of penitential church discipline meant to restore offending sinners in a way that was more than simply punitive but was also formative. On the other hand, Bucer understands penance to be an apostolic practice found in the early patristics Tertullian, Cyprian and Ambrose. Ambrose’s example is particularly significant; his refusal to welcome the Roman Emperor Theodosius to the Eucharist after Theodosius ordered the slaughter of a rebellious province until he had completed penance is noted at length in *Concerning the True Care of Souls*.¹² For Bucer, penance is a biblical practice that was practiced from the beginning of the apostolic church.

So how then should the church practice penance and thus cultivate particular virtues in its members? Bucer acknowledges at the outset that, as with practices such as baptism or the Lord’s Supper, there are specific biblical prescriptions beyond the written command to perform these acts: “Similarly, concerning this present matter of penance all we have is that carers of souls are to forgive the sins of all those who are sorry and promise to mend their ways.”¹³ We are not given a description of penance in *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, though we do see gestures toward public confession and withholding the Lord’s Supper. Nevertheless, Bucer believes it is possible for the Christian community to practice penance as it understands the end to which the practice works.

That end is described by Bucer to be authentic, heartfelt repentance. He describes this telos as “true sorrow and commitment to reformation”¹⁴ and describes the ideal repentant sinner as “one who is truly sorrow for his sins and committed with all his heart to mending his ways.”¹⁵ The accompanying characteristics of the authentic penitent will include “lamenting, weeping, praying, pleading, confessing, and repenting.”¹⁶ Bucer is sensitive to how repentance can be counterfeited. True repentance should be accompanied by sorrow and a resolve to live differently. “He does not consider that it would be enough simply to abstain from his misdeed and say, ‘I will never do it again.’”¹⁷ Penance, properly practiced, is intended to reinforce the dynamics of repentance as it moves the offender away from the attractions of sin and toward the goodness of godly character. Bucer sums up the end of penance in this way:

[To] introduce the person to a deeper, but believing contemplation of his evil and what it means in terms of serious offense to God’s goodness and his own undoing, in order that he might become the

¹² Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, 106–107.

¹³ Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, 114.

¹⁴ Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, 118.

¹⁵ Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, 118.

¹⁶ Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, 120.

¹⁷ Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, 118.

more avid for the grace of God and the more hostile to sins, submit himself the more heartily and entirely to God, and love him more ardently, the more he recognizes that he has bene forgiven; and that he might crucify and put to death in himself all evil and lusts and desires, and awaken and ignite all zeal for the will and pleasure of God.¹⁸

Bucer is attentive to the potential abuses of penance by the church. He lists three ways in which this practice can be misused. First, it can be used so severely that it causes people to leave the church and its attempts to facilitate true repentance. In this case, Bucer recommends moderation and restraint: “Better weak penance and meagre reformation, than none at all.”¹⁹ Second, Bucer warns that penance can still be used in a way that fails to bring about heartfelt repentance. In this situation it is done “in such a way that people may well accept the outward discipline and carry it out, without a heartfelt repentance and amendment of life.”²⁰ Penance must be administered out of a deep well of pastoral wisdom. He points to the ancient fathers who “took into account the people who had sinned and their particular situation; they considered and weighed up the individual’s circumstances and strength of Christian life, and also the circumstances of the whole church, and then prescribed the period and level of penance in order that both those who had sinned and the whole church were helped.”²¹ Third, Bucer recognizes that penance can be given in such a way that it leads to deep discouragement and self-condemnation. Because of the real danger “that the penitents sink into too great sadness and despair,”²² penance must always be performed with a view to the grace given to sinners in Jesus Christ. “True repentance must result from faith in Christ, and therefore there must remain the hope of grace.”²³

II. PENANCE AS FORMATION

Bucer is clearly aware of the possible dangers and abuses of penance. But in contrast to contemporary Reformers, he believes that it should continue to be practiced because of the benefit it extends to the individual Christian and to the church community. As opposed to punitive understandings of church discipline in response to grievous sins, Bucer argues for penance to be used formatively as a way of cultivating certain virtues in Christians.

So what are those virtues that Bucer believes penance cultivates? While there is no explicit presentation of the specific character that penance works toward within Christians, we can deduce from *Concerning the True Care of Souls* what those virtues might be. To begin with, we can find common cause with Shults and Sandage’s description of *humility* as a crucial virtue

¹⁸ Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, 127.

¹⁹ Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, 124.

²⁰ Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, 124.

²¹ Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, 126.

²² Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, 127.

²³ Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, 127.

for “forgivers.” “Humiliation”²⁴ is a part of the formational process that Bucer speaks of often within his discussion of penance. His description may sound harsh to our modern ears, but Bucer uses the word only to illustrate the process of bringing an offender to self-awareness about the seriousness of his or her actions. Humility—understood as the end to which the process of “humiliation” works—is marked by self-knowledge about the effects of sin and its impact upon the Christian community. This kind of self-knowledge serves as a deterrence, forming the Christian to be more circumspect and aware of future behavior.

A second virtue that Bucer believes penance cultivates can be called (for lack of a better term) *sincerity*. One of the guiding concerns of these reflections on penance in *Concerning the True Care of Souls* is the abiding presence of unrepentant offenders within the Church community, who utilize the language of apology and grace, but have either no intention of amending their behavior or are not engaged in a process of being formed to live otherwise. Bucer twice makes reference to those who might simply say, “I am sorry, I won’t do it again,”²⁵ or “I will never do it again,”²⁶ but who are not actively being formed in such a way as to live differently. Penance is a process that is meant to provide that needed formation. This integrity of speech and alignment of exterior action and inner disposition is a significant virtue that Bucer believes penance can foster.

For Bucer penance, far from being a harmful accretion upon repentance, is an ecclesial practice that builds up the body of Christ. In contrast to distortions of the practice that tie it to justification, penance properly understood is a formational act that heals sheep who wound themselves and others by their sinful behavior. “Penance is not satisfaction for past sins, but a medicine against present and future sins, because it is intended to purge and purify the remaining lusts and sinful desires and thus to protect against future transgressions.”²⁷ Who would disagree that the end that Bucer is pursuing should be pursued in the local church?

III. PRACTICING PENANCE IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

What would be involved in an attempt to retrieve penance within the local church today? We can only admit that there are numerous challenges facing most North American churches with even the foundational principles of church discipline. This unavoidable reality presents even greater challenges to the kind of practice that Bucer describes in *Concerning the True Care of Souls*. But if we were nonetheless to suggest how we might reclaim this practice in the local church, the following things would need to be taken into consideration.

Nomenclature. A major stumbling block with this practice in evangelical and Protestant churches is simply the word *penance*. Due to the distortion

²⁴ See, for example, Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, 122.

²⁵ Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, 118.

²⁶ Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, 118.

²⁷ Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, 131.

of the practice in the Middle Ages, early Reformers (Bucer excepted) dispensed with the practice because in their minds it was intrinsically linked with a Roman Catholic conception of salvation that connected forgiveness and merit. While the North American church is some distance from that context, that same link with merited salvation exists in the minds of many Christians. Another term that preserves the good of Bucer's suggestion while steering Christians away from the fears of its abuse is needed. *Reconciliation* is a preferred term within the current literature on forgiveness, and if it can be used more expansively, including not only the restoration of relationship between forgiver and offender but in such a way that includes the process of formation and care for each, it could serve as an excellent stand-in for the term penance. But regardless of what term is used to describe this more intentional practice of formation and discipleship for these members, pastors must use care in how they introduce and describe this practice.

Preventative Medicine. One of Bucer's favorite metaphors for the practice of penance is that of medicine. Penance is, as we have already seen, "a medicine against present and future sins, because it is intended to purge and purify the remaining lusts and sinful desires and thus to protect against future transgressions."²⁸ If penance is in a sense a kind of "preventative medicine" against even more grievous and damaging sin in the life of a local church, it is helpful to consider how it is one part of a larger set of postures and practices in the local church that would create a culture in which the practice could flourish.

To attempt the practice of penance without understanding how it fits within the wider culture and context of the local church will likely guarantee either its failure or its abuse. To avoid this, pastors might focus on a number of things. First, the twin virtues of penance—humility and sincerity—must be pursued outside of the practice of penance. Humility is of course a virtue that is notoriously easy to counterfeit and only achieved if pursued intentionally. And sincerity, too, is an end that is particularly difficult to measure. But pastors can intentionally create a culture where these two virtues are prized by modeling each in their relationship with staff, leadership, and the wider congregation. And we can be assured that our organizations cannot flourish unless we do possess them, and that in pursuing them we are seeking something that is essential to our churches.

Second, we might reconsider how church practices could be reoriented so that they coordinate better with the ongoing practice of penance. The regular celebration of the Lord's Supper is a practice that is described in connection to reconciliation and penance in Scripture. Current literature on forgiveness already makes this connection,²⁹ and Bucer also connects the restoration of alienated sinners to being welcomed to the Lord's Table. But pastors can also provide teaching and worship leadership that emphasizes the horizontal elements of the Lord's Supper. While pastors inherit com-

²⁸ Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, 131.

²⁹ See Shults and Sandage, *The Faces of Forgiveness* 213–216; Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness*, 175–182.

mitments and traditions related to the Lord's Supper, there is often an unexplored heritage of practices and theological imagination that remains untapped and can deepen and enrich the meaning and implications of the Lord's Table.³⁰

And there remains even more room for the imaginative integration of this practice into the life of the local church. Stories of reconciliation and repentance can be shared within the wider congregation as appropriate. Smaller groups within the congregation can be invited to intentional practices of reconciliation as a way of introducing the principles on a smaller scale. Studies of forgiveness and penance—a topic that is relevant and meaningful to every Christian in multiple ways—can be provided in various contexts. But whatever the approach, what remains important is that it is understood that penance is one part of a larger culture of “preventative medicine” that identifies and applies healing measures to sin within the life of the local church.

Pastoral Wisdom. Finally, pastors must bring to the practice of penance pastoral wisdom for the practice of caring for wounded and wounding sinners. Bucer is attentive to these needs in *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, noting how the same practice of penance applied to different kinds of men and women can lead to diverging outcomes. The care that each member of Christ's both receives must be neither too heavy nor too light, but instead fitted correctly to the needs of each person. The practice of penance will draw pastors more deeply into the personal practice of soul care for members of the Body of Christ.

This will require the pastor to practice Jesus' command to be “wise as serpents and innocent as doves” (Matthew 10:16, ESV). Pastors must be alert to how narcissists can abuse or manipulate the process, feigning deep woundedness while remaining unrepentant. On the other hand, pastors must also remain open to the hardest heart being changed by God's surprising grace. Leadership must be alert to how the power dynamics related to age, gender, and race within the local congregation leave this practice open to abuse. Conversely, pastors must also not flinch from the task calling to present each person mature in Christ.

This is a practice that plunges the pastor deep into the complexities and ambiguities of broken men and women in the Body of Christ. In order to care for these sheep in Christ's flock, pastors will need to call on the resources of psychology, theology, and spiritual direction. But in so doing, the pastor is more alive to his or her calling to care for the flock God has given to be tended.

This is a word that is particularly pointed for popular evangelical ecclesiology. In many churches today, the pastor is positioned in a way that fundamentally alienates him or her from their role as a shepherd of the flock. Instead, the pastor is primarily a charismatic teacher who leads from the pulpit (platform, stage, etc.), giving winsome content and perhaps dynamic

³⁰ See, in particular, J. Todd Billings, *Remembrance, Communion, and Hope: Rediscovering the Gospel at the Lord's Table* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018).

leadership. The call to be a shepherd according to the vision that we have articulated here is quite different. It is a vocation that can only take place when ministering in close proximity to the congregation.

CONCLUSION

The deepening reflection on the practice of forgiveness within the Christian community by theologians and psychologists has been a positive development of recent years. But the tendency to focus on the formation of forgiving parties in forgiveness rather than offenders is disproportionate to the needs of the Christian community. By retrieving Martin Bucer's reflections on penance in *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, the Church can be further formed to care for its members by cultivating the needed virtues for forgiving and also seeking forgiveness.