Marriage and Divorce in the Thought of Martin Bucer
Habent sua fata libelli

This book has been brought to publication with the generous support of Truman State University, Kirksville, Missouri and the Huguenot Society of America

Raymond A. Mentzer, General Editor

Composed by Thomas Jefferson University Press at Truman State University
Cover art and title page by Teresa Wheeler
Manufactured by Edwards Brothers, Ann Arbor, Michigan
Text is set in Minion 11/13
MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE

in the Thought of Martin Bucer

H. J. Selderhuis

translated from the Dutch by
John Vriend and
Lyle D. Bierma

SIXTEENTH CENTURY ESSAYS & STUDIES
Volume XLVIII
May God grant that we above all desire, attend to, and fulfill his will. Amen.

—Martin Bucer, *Von der Ehe und Ehescheidung*, 97b
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Abbreviations

This is a list of abbreviations for the the most frequently cited works. Complete bibliographical information for these works begins on page 371.

ARG Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte
AST Archive of the St. Thomas Chapter, Strasbourg
BDS Martin Bucers Deutsche Schriften
Best. Ver. Bestendige Verantwortung
Bibl. Stupperich, “Bibliographia Bucerana”
BOL Martini Buceri Opera Latina
CO Calvini opera . . . omnia (CR, vols. 29-87)
Corr. Correspondance de Martin Bucer
CR Corpus Reformatorum
DRC Bucer, De Regno Christi
EE Bucer, Von der Ehe und Ehescheidung
Eph. (1527) Bucer, Epistola D. Paulli ad Ephesios
Eph. (1551) Bucer, Praelectiones…ad Ephesios
Ev. Bucer, Enarrationes…in quatuor Evangelia
Iud. Bucer, Commentarii in librum Iudicum
Joh. Ev. Enarratio in Evangelion Iohannis
LB Erasmus Opera Omnia (Leiden edition)
MPL Migne, Patrologiae cursus completus, series Latina
Ps. Psalmorum libri quinque ad Hebraicam veritatem traducti …
RE Realencyklopädie für protestantische Theologie und Kirche, 3d ed.
Rom. Bucer, Metaphrases et enarrationes…ad Romanos
SM Bucer, Scriptum maius vom Eegericht
STh Summa Theologica
TE Trau- und Ehestandpredigt
TRE Theologische Realencyklopädie
Var. Eccles. Varia Ecclesiastica
WA Martin Luthers Werke (Weimar edition)
Z Huldreich Zwinglis Sämtliche Werke (CR, vols. 88–)
**Introduction**

*In the matter of marriage Bucer is worse than permissive. One time, around the table, I heard him debate this issue when he stated that divorce should be granted on any ground, no matter how trivial.*

Such was the opinion of the English merchant John Burcher in 1550. This judgment is significant in that it is representative for existing opinion on Bucer’s view of marriage and divorce. Burcher’s words make clear, first of all, that when Bucer’s view of marriage comes up people primarily and often exclusively think of his ideas on divorce. In point of fact, as we will discover, these views are as remarkable for our time as they were sensational in Bucer’s day. In the second place, the passage cited from Burcher’s letter reflects how negatively and indiscriminately people at the time thought about Bucer’s views, and this negative estimate of Bucer has, unfortunately, largely continued since.

Burcher’s opinion of Bucer has even been taken over by scholars in the twentieth century. Wendel, a renowned Bucer expert, also limits himself to Bucer’s ideas on divorce. He believes that Bucer’s passion for harmonization at all cost played tricks on him, and that this tendency resulted in a “fairly deceptive casuistry.” The well-known Bucer scholar J. V. Pollet even thinks that in the area of marriage Bucer was slack. K. Koch, too, has little good to say about Bucer’s views, something that is hardly surprising since Koch takes Luther as his norm. G. May, offering a Catholic critique of the Protestant position on divorce, cannot imagine that someone so eager to be biblical can entertain such views.

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5. "Es entbehrt nicht eines grotesken Zuges, wenn ein Vertreter des Schriftprinzips und Anwalt der
also is J. W. Van den Bosch’s simplistic proposition in his dissertation on Bucer’s doctrine of predestination: “Bucer’s view of divorce is rightly contested by Calvin.” Less clear are the grounds on which Burcher and those who concurred with his opinion reject Bucer’s views on marriage. A possible reason is that having noted Bucer’s words about the dissolution of marriage, they stopped there and did not relate them to what he wrote about the purpose and meaning of marriage. It is downright astonishing that for centuries scholars ignored the many things Bucer wrote about marriage, and focused exclusively on his ideas on divorce. It is precisely by judging his views on divorce in light of his view of marriage and, in this connection, by looking at the entire issue in light of his biography and theology that one begins to understand Bucer’s overall view. To be included in such a study as well is the social and ecclesiastical context of the sixteenth century.

Insofar as Bucer was not expressly rejected, scholars still overlooked his contribution to the development of marriage law, a fate which, for that matter, also befell the study of his theology. Exceptions to this rule are W. Köhler and H. Eells, but these authors were similarly unable, in view of the subject of their study, to paint a complete picture of Bucer’s views. It is only in recent years that historians again focused on Bucer’s views and tried to do more justice to him. Still, up until the present no systematic study of Bucer’s writings on marriage has been under-

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6) J. W. van den Bosch, “De ontwikkeling van Bucers praedestinatiegedachten voor het optreden van Calvijn” (Ph.D. diss., University of Amsterdam, 1922), proposition 3.


Introduction

taken, despite the fact that such a study has been called for more than once. Perhaps the reason for this gap is that only a very small part of these writings has appeared in print and that the majority consist of a number of large and small treatises, which, to make matters even more difficult, are in part located in archives outside Strasbourg. The bulk of these writings plus the information on this subject in other works of Bucer offer amply sufficient material for a complete overview. Also for this reason we have restricted ourselves to furnishing a systematic survey of Bucer’s ideas on marriage, divorce, and celibacy. To keep the size of this book manageable, we avoided going deeper into Bucer’s concept of law and his theology than was strictly necessary. This book is intended—in view of its subject—for a larger readership than that of the academic community and so, in part for that reason, we have included no Latin and only a few German quotations in the text.

Since a modern edition of Bucer’s writings on marriage will appear in the series Deutsche Schriften, where they will be given an extensive introduction, we have confined ourselves in the footnotes to a brief bibliographic reference and a note on the genesis of every treatise insofar as information on it is available.

Our topic is important, first of all, for an understanding of Bucer’s person, work, and theology. This book is a contribution to the Bucer research, which has picked up momentum only in the last few decades. At the same time, an exposition of Bucer’s views can potentially make a contribution to legal and social history, since this topic is currently of much interest, as is evident from a growing number of studies on marriage and the family and the position and role of women during the Reformation. The topic, however, is not just of historical interest. The reader will find that Bucer’s ideas on marriage and divorce are relevant for the church and society today. Interesting in this connection is Bucer’s focus on the

10Established by divine ordinance. Nevertheless, Ozment does point out Bucer’s uniqueness; see, e.g., Ozment, When Fathers Ruled, 84, 93.


12See the indexes at the back of this book for an overview of these treatises.

position of women. This timeliness is implicit in the fact that we are here dealing with a topic that confronts every human, every society, and every religious persuasion. The Christian church especially must be engaged in ongoing reflection on this theme, since for this subject there are fixed biblical norms that must be given shape in a world with changing ethical views, while (at least in Western Europe) the formation and dissolution of marriages as such do not fall within the domain of the church. In this book, therefore, we take a backward look, in part with a view to then looking around and ahead. We undertook and completed this study out of the conviction that current issues in the realm of marriage and divorce can in part be resolved from the perspective of the past. The selection of Bucer was not only inspired by the fact that this part of the man’s work merits further attention but also by the idea that the (contemporary) church and society may profit from taking a serious look at his views and proposals.

The book is divided into four sections. The section on the historical background contains a concise overview of canonical marriage law as it prevailed in the sixteenth century, as well as of its history. This survey is needed first as a historical backdrop that makes the criticism of the Reformation intelligible. Second, it enables the reader to identify the differences and similarities between Bucer’s proposed marriage law and that of the Catholic church. To highlight Bucer’s own position we subsequently portray the views on marriage held by other reformers and developments in this area. Erasmus and Bullinger are each treated separately. Erasmus, by his criticism, gave a powerful impulse to fresh reflection on marriage law and Bucer himself repeatedly appeals to Erasmus in this area. Bullinger is discussed because he, too, wrote extensively on this topic. Striking, however, is that, although he took note of the writings of Bucer, his views are less rooted in theology than those of his Strasbourg colleague. This section of background orientation serves mainly as a foil to bring out Bucer’s own unique position and originality.


Introduction

In the biographical section we portray Bucer’s life and work with the help of well-known Bucer biographies and Bucer’s correspondence. Naturally, we are not aiming at giving a complete biography. The content of this section is specifically qualified by the theme of marriage to show the extent to which Bucer was occupied with it throughout his life and how it played a decisive role in his own life. Appropriate to that context is also the sketch of his own married life. This sketch is necessary in part to make clear that his pursuit of greater possibilities for divorce was not motivated by a bad marriage at home. In this biographical section we also present an account of the role Bucer played with respect to the marital issues of Henry VIII and Philip of Hesse.

In the third section, which furnishes a systematic survey of Bucer’s views on marriage, divorce, and celibacy, we primarily use Bucer’s writings on marriage and other important works of his in which this topic is dealt with. The sheer bulk of the available material forced us to curtail the comparison with contemporaries. We did attempt to make clear the high degree to which Bucer’s views on marriage, divorce, and celibacy are grounded in his theology. That grounding is not surprising since Bucer defines theology as “the art of living a virtuous and orderly life.” The study of Bucer’s writings on marriage has shown that his views on the subject remained constant. Since differences between his earlier and later writings pertained only to details, we were able to work the pertinent data from all of Bucer’s works into a single survey and did not have to account for radical changes in his development.

In the concluding section the reader will find an inventory of reactions to Bucer’s proposals. Since the reactions from within the Catholic camp are predictably negative, we focus especially on the reactions from the Protestant side. Then follows a tentative exploration of where and how Bucer’s ideas exerted influence.

Considering the volume and content of Bucer’s writings on marriage and the extent to which he was personally involved in the subject, one can only be astonished that no monograph on this topic has appeared before. I cordially hope that the value of this book will somewhat match the importance of the subject.

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16In addition to the printed editions of Bucer’s letters, we have used the Thesaurus Baumianus (hereafter cited as Th. B.), a collection of letters preserved in the Strasbourg university library.

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General Index

Note: In this index, MB refers to Martin Bucer. Major sections under Bucer, Martin, include “hermeneutics,” “life,” “marriage,” “theology,” “views,” and “writing.” An “n” after a page number indicates a footnote and is followed by the footnote number.

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