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CONCERNING THE TRUE CARE OF
SOULS

Martin Bucer

Translated into English by

PETER BEALE

With an Historical Introduction by

DAVID F. WRIGHT



THE BANNER OF TRUTH TRUST

[90] [A1a]

CONCERNING THE TRUE CARE OF SOULS
AND GENUINE PASTORAL MINISTRY,
AND HOW THE LATTER IS TO BE ORDERED
AND CARRIED OUT IN THE CHURCH OF CHRIST

BY MARTIN BUCER.

HERE YOU WILL FIND THE ESSENTIAL MEANS WHEREBY
WE CAN ESCAPE FROM THE PRESENT SO DEPLORABLE AND
PERNICIOUS STATE OF RELIGIOUS SCHISM AND DIVISION
AND RETURN TO TRUE UNITY AND GOOD CHRISTIAN ORDER
IN THE CHURCHES.

KNOWLEDGE WHICH IS USEFUL
NOT ONLY TO THE CONGREGATIONS OF CHRIST,
BUT ALSO TO PASTORS AND RULERS.

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A.D. 1538.

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^[91] **T**o all believers in our Lord Jesus Christ, grace and peace from God our heavenly Father and our only Saviour and Head, Jesus Christ, that they may rightly recognize and love his church and the fellowship of his people.

We all acknowledge that we believe in one Christian church, that is, one fellowship of saints, and that we must constitute and have such a church and fellowship, in which the faith which we confess in God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is a true and living one. However, the nature of this church and fellowship, what its extent is, what rule and regulation it is to have, is fundamentally so little recognized that it befits anyone who really considers this lack to be filled with pity. Those who still undertake the propagation and defence of the papistical tyranny and abuse accuse us, whom they call Lutherans, of separating ourselves from the Christian ^[92] church and fellowship, demolishing its order and rule, and destroying the discipline and obedience of believers. But when we turn to the truth we find that on the contrary it is they who have not only torn and disturbed the church of Christ ^[A2b] and all true fellowship of the saints in Christ, but completely swallowed up and eradicated all understanding of the church and fellowship of believers in Christ.

For the people have been led by them into thinking that if they have been baptized and take part in the common ceremonies, and do not interfere in the affairs of the so-called priests, then they belong to the church and congregation of Christ, even though they may never really have come to know Christ our Lord, and live in

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open sin, relying for their comfort in God not on Christ, but on the ceremonies of the so-called priests, their own good works, and the merits of dead saints. Indeed, they would be unable to place their trust in Christ the Lord, since in all their life and conduct they contemptuously despise him and his holy word.

From all the popish teaching, who would realize that in Christ we are to have one heart and one soul, and to be his body and members together in him, if in any sense we are to be Christians? And that no-one can be a member of the Lord and of his church and at the same time a member and relative of the world? Where are the innocent servants of Christ who bring Christ's sheep nothing but the Lord's voice and word,^[93] who are zealous to seek all the Lord's lost sheep, to bring back those which have gone astray, to heal the injured, to strengthen the weak, to guard the strong and feed them aright [Ezek. 34:16]? And also to shut out from the congregation of Christ all those who^[A3a] do not wish to listen to the Lord's word and mend their ways? Yes, who knows less about the whole matter of obedience to the gospel, church discipline, repentance of sins and Christian order; who by life and conduct opposes these to a greater and worse extent, than our pope, with his cardinals, bishops and all their entourage? Yet these are the ones who cry out against us and accuse us of apostatizing from the church and destroying its discipline and rule!

These are the ones we have to thank that so few people know or consider what sort of fellowship the Christian church is, what order and rule it should have, how our only King and Lord Christ rules us in his kingdom and makes us holy. And that is how it is that obedience to the holy gospel and church discipline is still so unknown and despised, even among those who wish to be seen as recognizing the papistical abuse and wanting to flee from it and submit themselves to the yoke of Christ.

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Moreover Satan, just as at the beginning of the gospel, at the time of the dear apostles, and whenever the truth of Christ has sought to break out more strongly, and so since the Lord has let the light of his holy gospel illuminate us again, has awakened all manner of sects and heresies; and since each of these heresies claims to be the church, they have torn many naïve hearts away from the true fellowship of Christ, or at least caused manifold hindrances to those who are completely ^[94][A3b] committed to the congregation of Christ. This is what this carnal crowd is like, seeking under the name of Christian freedom nothing but carnal impudence and declining above all to put up with Christian correction and discipline, and at the same time not being idle in constantly throwing off the yoke of Christ and doing all in their desire and power to hamper all the order of the church.

It is this tool of antichrist, and certainly not the Lutheran doctrine (which teaches how to trust completely in Christ and also to commit oneself to entire obedience to his word), which has resulted in so few, even of those who do not themselves claim to be the congregation of Christ, rightly understanding or wanting to promote the fellowship, discipline and rule of the church.

We want to demonstrate to all the pious children of God, who from their hearts pray for the future of the kingdom of Christ, according to the measure of our faith, our own duty in this so deplorable scattering of the church, so that they may thoroughly understand what the church of Christ is, what rule and order it must have, who its true ministers are and how they are to exercise their ministry in the care of souls and the pastoral office for the true salvation of Christ's lambs; so that we may at last be a true and rightly ordered church of God and the body of Christ, which we have to be or else be eternally cast out from Christ the Lord and his kingdom.

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This is why we have undertaken the writing of this little book concerning all these matters, inserting various quotations from the word of God ^[A4a] and, insofar as the Lord has given us grace, explaining them. From these every Christian can thoroughly learn what sort of fellowship the church of Christ is, how Christ the Lord alone rules, what ministry he requires in that rule and how this ministry is to be ordered and performed, in relation to all those who are brought to the church of Christ and wish to be kept and built up in it.

We have throughout set out the scriptural quotations, so that the Christian reader can himself see the foundation of the word, consider it ^[95] and lay it up in his heart. For there are not a few who, as soon as anything is said about church discipline and order, are always crying out that we want to bring back the traditions and bondage of men; and so we do not wish to put forward anything other than the obvious and certain teaching and clear undoubted command of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The unity of the church consists not in having the same ceremonies, but in having the same doctrine, faith, and right administration of the sacraments.

From this it will be seen if we, who are called Lutherans, desire to separate ourselves from the Christian congregation, or are seeking to escape the authority and discipline of the church, and shun the true exercise of repentance with prayer, fasting and everything else. Those who call upon our dear Lord Jesus Christ in truth, whatever their outward customs and identity may be, we wish to acknowledge and love as our members in Christ the Lord. And let them also treat us in the same way, irrespective of the fact that we may not share the same ceremonies and church practices. For the fellowship of the Christian church consists not in ceremonies and outward practices, but in true faith, ^[A4b] in obedience to the pure gospel, and in the right use of the holy sacraments as the Lord

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has ordained them. Everything else each church has to arrange as it finds best for itself. In any case this is something which the old holy fathers recognized and maintained.

We have separated from the antichrists, not from anyone in authority over the church.

We do not, therefore, wish to tear ourselves away from any authority in the church. But there is no authority or power in the church except that which is for its good. We gladly listen to the ministers of Christ, whoever they may be and whatever title they bear. But if we are to be Christ's sheep we must run away from those who have a stranger's voice [John 10:5]. Those who bring another gospel we must regard as accursed, even if they were angels from heaven [Gal. 1:8]. As for those who are idolaters, robbers of churches, those whose whole lives are stained by the most hideous vices, but claim to be brothers and members of the church, we must have nothing at all to do with them and reject them completely. This is even more seriously to be observed when these people claim for themselves a greater authority in the church, like the pope, cardinals and bishops. This we are ^[96] instructed to do not only in holy scripture, but also by all the ancient councils of the church. Were we not to separate from these false and godless church leaders and choose true and faithful ministers, we would lose our fear of God, violate the Lord's command, and stain ourselves with the godlessness of the false ministers. This was recognized and written with great ^[A5a] solemnity by the holy martyr and bishop Cyprian in his fourth epistle. Indeed, the ancient holy fathers agree with him, both in the decrees of the councils and in their own writings. Therefore no-one is in a position to accuse us in any way of being a sect which has apostatized from the church and its obedience.

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Repentance and Christian discipline and practices have been driven out and destroyed by the papists.

In the same way we do not want to omit anything in restoring repentance, discipline, and all spiritual practices like prayer, fasting and the rest, to their proper value and godly use, so that nothing should hinder us in this any more; because the people have been reduced by the popish seducers to a state where they know nothing at all about genuine, heartfelt prayer, fasting and penitential practices, even considering them to be a strange and loathsome thing. So the poor apostate Vicel and those like him must attribute this false teaching not to us, but to their popes, bishops and priests, because we faithfully teach the true and living faith in Christ, to whom alone is due all true repentance and godly mortification of the flesh. Therefore we continuously preach the necessity of these fruits of the Spirit; but their pope, bishops and priests, whom they claim to be the catholics, are ignorant both of faith in Christ and of the true fruits of faith, instead contradicting to the greatest degree both by life and by conduct all faith and repentance—as, sadly, can all too horribly be seen by all the world.

The sects falsely slander the true doctrine by comparing it with the ‘weed’ which in fact they are planting and growing together with their father, Satan.

This little book will also show all pious Christians how the leaders of the sects falsely accuse us of teaching a faith which is devoid of fruits and works, ^[A5b] and not insisting that our people embrace the true fellowship and distinguishing marks of the body of Christ and Christian discipline. But our doctrine, and our faithfulness and diligence in proclaiming it, are in no way to be blamed for the fact that the fruit of faith and Christian ^[97] discipline is so far observed only feebly in the mass of people who belong to us. We read in the gospel and the writings of Paul and all the ancient holy fathers that really zealous Christians will never constitute a

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great number [Matt. 7:13; 20:16; Luke 1:32; Rom. 11:5 &c]. This is what the Lord himself, his holy apostles and the most precious martyrs have preached.

And yet, praise God, there are to be found on all sides many really faithful Christians, who have genuinely trusted in Christ and given themselves over to a heartfelt obedience to the gospel through the doctrine of Christ which he has granted us to maintain. With regard to what is still lacking, this can be put down to the truth that the cause of it lies with Satan, the corrupted nature of our flesh, the devastation wrought by popery, and the way in which the sect leaders and their disciples constantly cast poisonous slander on true doctrine and urge withdrawal from the fellowship of Christ, and by no means with the holy and blessed doctrine of Christ which he has imparted to us. And it is also true that only evil could come from the doctrine of the sects, which is claimed to be in line with the life of the disciples; for, sadly, we daily learn in only too gruesome a way that with their handful of disciples they are offering us desert, thorns and thistles in the place of figs and grapes [Matt. 7:16]. For the true fruit of the Spirit is *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, ^[A6a] goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control* [Gal. 5:22]. And those belonging to this company are not those who seek the Lord with all their hearts, but those who reject and avoid such, falsely accusing them, believing and propagating all manner of untruths about them, pleasing themselves, being envious, spiteful, selfish, and often, despite all appearance and boasting of possessing a higher spirit, falling into chaotic sexual immorality, as is horribly evident every day amongst the poor eccentrics. However, we will not and ought not judge anyone's doctrine from the lives of those who glory in that doctrine, but only ^[98] according to the word of the Lord, which alone is infallible.

In this little book we have by his grace held to that same eternal word of the Lord, not just according to the letter (although that,

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too, is of God), but according to the true spirit and power of the Lord, and set forth the nature, character, law, order and government of the church of Christ from that same word of God alone, not from any human composition. In this way all pious Christian souls are to see that in what follows we are not seeking anything else, other than the true increase of the kingdom of our Lord Jesus and its genuine and authentic fruit. And in doing this it was not our intention even to the slightest degree to hurt or offend anyone anywhere, whatever he does or intends to do, who is in Christ—we emphasize ‘in Christ’, our dear Lord, to whom everything else must be subordinated. We rather desire gladly to open up and offer in ^[A6b] the friendliest way the bosom of Christ, so large and wide, only so that he who bought us at so great a price [1 Cor. 7:23] might remain our Lord and Saviour, and we his kingdom and body.

May he grant that at last we may rightly understand that we possess everything good in him alone, and without him eternal death; in this way we will easily deny ourselves all things and devote ourselves entirely to his word and Spirit. In this way also we will become of one heart and soul in him, becoming through his nurture in his kingdom ever freer of the old nature and stronger in his new life; and thus belong to him as living, mature members of a healthy and holy body, to his eternal praise and the increase of his holy kingdom. Amen.

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[1(B1)a]