

From 16th Century Strasbourg to the 21st Century Church:
Bucer's 'Little Book' as a Guide for a Historical Approach for Leadership Development
and Elder Ordination in Reformed Congregations

Written by J. Alberto Paredes

Submitted to:

Prof. Thomas D. Hawkes, Ph.D.

In May 2019

In Attendance of Those Requirements For
The PT740 Church Planting Leadership Course
As the Assigned Research Paper
At the Reformed Theological Seminary, Charlotte, NC.

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Developing leaders seems like an activity completely and solely concerned about the church's future. After all, those whom we help develop today are the ones who will serve the church tomorrow. If so, why looking back in Church History for a model of Leadership Development? We live in a day and age where Christendom is not very interested in Church History. Some branches of Protestantism have gone so far as to say that they, as individuals, and their relationship with God through the Holy Spirit are more than enough for raising as faithful Christians and raising Christian leaders. Nevertheless, they assert this forgetting, in the first place, the fact that we are united to every other single brother and sister in Christ by this same Spirit. Secondly, that this Holy Spirit has gifted his people to build this same church they speak about. And lastly, that all these truths include not only every living Christians today, but those who had lived before us, perhaps in a much more difficult day and age. I here am with Rea when he defines Church History as the study of the church's past, in order to understand the church's present, and to improve the church's future.¹

Now, this being granted, the questions still remain: Why Bucer and his *'little book'*? Let me outline a few reasons. Bucer was a reformer known, among other things, for having a zeal for church unity. He was one of the few reformers who mediated (at least successfully) between Lutherans and the Swiss when the Reformed Church needed it the most.² Along with that, he mentored and disciplined John Calvin, at that time a reckless proud young theologian, and lead him into the depths of a pious pastoral ministry.³ Wright even mentions that it would be more appropriate to call Calvin a *Buceran*, than to call Bucer a *Calvinist*.⁴

¹ Robert F. Rea, *Why Church History Matters: An Invitation to Love and Learn from Our Past* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 24.

² David F Wright, "Historical Introduction," in *Concerning the True Care of Souls* (Edinburgh, EH, UK: Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2009), xii.

³ Bruce Gordon, *Calvin* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 2011), 85–89.

⁴ Wright, "Historical Introduction," xiii.

Along with this, that is in itself impressive, we know that Bucer was regularly asked by other reformers to work in reformed church orders which included standards of church discipline. This led to him writing his ‘Concerning the True Care of the Souls.’ A book full of church order and discipline which aimed mainly to other pastors and ministers in training. This might be the case as he himself commented on this work saying that it *embodied the teaching on church ministry, discipline and the communion between Christ and his members*, and that *he had written it for the benefit of those who sought in the ministry [...] more a way of casting off the papal yoke than to submitting to the yoke of Christ.*⁵

Since a first account of him as a full-time minister in 1524, to the time this volume was first printed in 1538, he had been through almost 15 years of ministry. The collective knowledge acquire throughout his years of ministry and teaching in precisely this topic, is an indicator that when we read his ‘little book’, as he would later call it,⁶ we are not engaging with a young theologian, but with a consummate pastor. Something like what Clinton might call, a leader who was between his *Life-maturing*⁷ and his *Convergence*⁸ stage of leadership development. There are, of course, other reasons to be compelled, along with Calvin and many others, to follow Bucer’s example. Nevertheless, for the sake of brevity, let us move on.

Something worthy to be mention is the slight, yet real, different existing between a guide and a mold. A guide might help one move towards the right direction, whereas a mold is meant to make exact replicas of any given thing. When we take Bucer’s *Concerning the True Care of Souls* as a guide, rather than as a mold, we are asserting that the wisdom contained therein has been and still is worthy to be followed, whereas, at the same, time we recognize that it is not meant to be a precise textbook for leadership developing in a post-modern world. We need to acknowledge that some things have changed. For instance, the civil magistrates have no more interest (at least so far) in entering into church discipline affairs. Also, we now have more scientific tools to test our gifts and personalities faster and more accurately than before. Therefore, using it

⁵ Wright, “Historical Introduction,” xv.

⁶ Martin Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, trans. Peter Beale (Edinburgh, EH, UK: Carlisle, PA : Banner of Truth Trust, 2009), xxxiv.

⁷ J. Robert Clinton, *The Making of a Leader: Recognizing the Lessons and Stages of Leadership Development*, Rev. ed. (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2012), 146.

⁸ Clinton, *The Making of a Leader*, 28.

as a guide will enhance, rather than a monologue, a dialogue between the 16th century Strasbourg Reformed Church, and the 21st century modern church.

As leading the church is primary a responsibility given by God to Elders, it is to them towards this leadership development program will be directed. As so, there is a process to be followed from the way someone will enter into the program, until the point where the church can vote for it to establish him as an ordained elder in the church.

Preparation of the Church

Theological preparation and foundation are to be given to those who will propose possible candidates. The visible church, that is to say, the active members of the local community must be fully qualified to propose and elect the men whom they consider biblically fit for the call to be elders of the church. The church must cast an informed vote, for in electing its authorities, it is delivering its trust, but it is also voluntarily submitting to its authority.

For this, whenever an election season approaches it must manifest itself before the congregation that such ecclesiastical exercise is near to come, and it is then also just, correct, and necessary, to remind the church of the responsibility that she has to establish elders, as well as of the requirements for an elder as outlined in Scripture.

This can be accomplished in various manners, whether by preaching the biblical portions in which these truths are described,⁹ by diligent study in groups on the subject, by workshops and intensive courses prepared in advance of the electoral season, or even a combination of these.

Observation of candidates

While announcing to the church that an election of elders will be carried out and beginning theological preparation and biblical foundations for it, it should be encouraged to begin observing prospective candidates to match what is in the word of God, pray for them, and pray for future elections. Even the members of the congregation should be encouraged to approach that candidate in which they have thought, and to discuss if a desire exists to the ministry in other that they can propose it for this leadership position. Bucer speak of

⁹ 1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9.

these as to do a *careful scrutiny of which people the Lord has granted to be skillful and zealous for such ministry*, and that *we must pray to God to give us faithful ministers*.¹⁰

Proposals Reception

The session will set a date and time for the reception of proposals to candidate for elder of the church which will not have any extension. It will also be established a protocol and means by which any proposal is to be received, using verifiable written documents that may demonstrate any proposal. Those men who are proposed must belong to the local church (*membership*) and be in good standings with it. All the proposed brethren will enter the *eligibility process* under the functional term of *Nominee for Church Elder*. This title is important since it does not confer any authorization on the part of the session, but it only indicates that such a brother has been proposed by some other brother to enter the *eligibility process*, without having been approved for an elderly office.

Eligibility Process

Every candidate will be taken into account to be assessed in all respects to the biblically necessary requirements and skills to exercise the elderly ministry. To this evaluation process, whose purpose is to determine who will be eligible candidates for the elders of the church by the congregation we have called it the *eligibility process*.

This *eligibility process* consists of three main items to be assessed through specific activities for each of them: The *personal character*, the *doctrine*, And the *ability to teach*.

The items will be evaluated in that precise order and each one will be a prerequisite of the previous for continuing in the *eligibility process*. That is to say that the *doctrine* cannot be evaluated if the *personal character* has not been evaluated and approved by the consistory. Similarly, the *ability to teach* will not be assessed until the *doctrine* has been evaluated and approved.

The specific order of these assessments has its own rationale. When a man does not have a good testimony, it is clear that, for him, having a robust doctrine is of little use for his life, if he actually has it. Such a man should be lovingly disciplined to return to the good ways of Christian living, but not considered as

¹⁰ Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, 60.

a potential elder. Also, before evaluating any ability to teach, the Church must be ensuring and be aware that your teaching is well grounded in the word of God. So that, if someone's doctrine is not biblical, his ability to teach is of little use to the church as an elder, even perhaps, harmful.

No candidate may be voted an elder without having been evaluated and approved by the consistory in the three items previously mentioned. Bucer speaks lengthily about these matters in his chapter titled: *What Sorts of People the Elders Are to Be, and How They Are to Be Chosen and Installed*. About the testing of elders before going into ministry he says that *the ministers of the church must be skilled and experienced, and also well proven in their correct handling of the word of God and guarding against false doctrine*.¹¹ He also states that elders are to be *well tested*¹² and that *no-one is to be accepted untried into his ministry*.¹³

Those brothers who for some reason or another cannot continue in the eligibility process continue to be part of the church and continue their previous functions in the congregation. Not continuing the eligibility process is not bad, it simply indicates that, at the moment, it is not ready for the call to be an elder. There is no limit to how often a sibling can enter the eligibility process. The decision of the consistory on the eligibility of each candidate shall be unappealable.

Personal Character

The word speaks of the bishop as blameless on more than one occasion. This characteristic of blamelessness is manifested by a holy testimony, though not necessarily perfect, worthy of a male son of God and of an ambassador of Christ, which includes sexual purity, good government of his household, sobriety, seriousness, prudence, among other qualities bestowed by the Holy Spirit.

The evaluation of the personal character will be carried out by the consistory in private upon each one of the candidates. A life which gives good witness of these qualities will be approved by the consistory, but a life that testifies a serious and/or recurrent problem with one or more of the areas evaluated will not be approved, and that person will not be able to continue at that time in the *eligibility process*. Being in a process of ecclesiastical discipline is a direct disqualification to continue the eligibility process. As Bucer states it,

¹¹ Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, 44.

¹² Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, 62.

¹³ Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, 46.

he who is to be an elder that *it is a special requirement of the Holy Spirit that they should excel in those virtues by which they may be a particularly outstanding example to the flock of Christ.*¹⁴

Let us remember that one who is called to be an elder will be at the forefront of spiritual warfare and must be strong in his faith and have wisdom and intelligence to lead in this struggle, to animate, to care for, and to carry the weakest and the wounded. Consenting that a brother wounded by sin is at the forefront of the battle would not only be irresponsible for the church, but unloving for that Brother.

Doctrine

The evaluation of doctrine is crucial and will allow us to filter those who the bible speak of as neophytes in the faith (*that is, new people in the faith, or children in the faith*). Let us remember that the one who is called to be an elder must oversee the healthy doctrine of the congregation, so that if he does not have a sound doctrine, then he may not fall before the heresies of the world and the attacks of Satan to the church of Christ. An elder should be a guardian of the Church. As Bucer comments, one of his primordial tasks is to protect the church.¹⁵

A healthy doctrine must be a robust doctrine, healthy, nourished, not sick, not hesitant, but safe and well-grounded in the Word of God. Therefore, the evaluation of the doctrine will consist of three main steps: *diagnosis, leadership development, and final evaluation.*

Diagnosis

First, A diagnostic test will be carried out with a twofold purpose: to dismiss those who qualify as neophytes, and to establish a diagnosis on the doctrinal strengths and weaknesses of those who may be considered for eligibility. The diagnostic test will consist of a written test of between 180 and 210 questions in the areas of *Biblical Theology, Systematic Theology, and Practical Theology.*

Proposed candidates who are in the eligibility process up to this point will be provided with an agenda so that they can recognize and prepare in areas that they consider to be weaker in advance of a minimum of 24 hours prior to the exam. The test will be carried out on the date determined by the session in functions.

¹⁴ Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, 47.

¹⁵ Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, 70.

Participants will be allowed to take the test with their own Bible, and they may ask for the possibility of a personal revision if unsatisfied with the results. Only those who obtain more than 60% per cent in at least two of the three areas to be assessed may continue the *eligibility process*. Those who obtain qualifications lower than 60% in two of the three areas to be assessed will not be able to continue in the *eligibility process*.

Leadership Development

Based on the information obtained in the first diagnostic test, the consistory will develop a *Leadership Development Academic Program* to strengthen the weaknesses and reinforce the doctrinal strengths of those candidates who continue in the process.

This *Leadership Development Academic Program* will be one-year long and 2.5 hours a week. In this time, participants will begin by a 20-minute book discussion on Bucer's *Concerning the True Care of the Souls*, which is 12 chapters long, so, reading one chapter a month, it will be finished by the end of that year. Following that, there will be a 20-minute space for group prayer in which participants will pray for the process, for one-another, and for the church. After that, a first 45-minute module on either Biblical Theology, Systematic Theology, History of the Church, Apologetics and Evangelism, and Theology of Missions. The themes will be changing throughout the academic year driven by the results of the diagnostic test. Then, a second module will be another 45-minute space in which Pastoral Theology and Practice will be discussed. This will be the main themes of the second module throughout the whole year.

Each eligible candidate must comply with at least 80% of the total hours required to retain their *eligibility status*, regardless of their grades on the diagnostic test. This will help evaluate the commitment to the Church and the disposition and humility of the candidate.

Along with the academic curriculum, current elders must engage in discipling from two to three elder *nominees* by gathering, at least, every other week to speak on issues of pastoral experience, devotional readings, prayer and encouraging. At the same time, once a month the discipler should spend one-on-one time with disciples to speak on accountability, character and prayer.

Final Evaluation

Similar to the diagnostic test, the final evaluation will consist of a written test of between 180 and 210 questions in the areas of *Biblical Theology*, *Systematic Theology*, and *Practical Theology*.

The syllabus will be exactly the same as that given in the diagnostic evaluation. The test will be carried out at the place and Date determined by the consistory with the possibility of consulting the Bible during the whole exam. Only those who obtain more than 80% percent in the three areas to be assessed will be able to continue the *eligibility process*. Those who obtain grades below 80% in one of the three areas to be assessed will not be able to continue the *eligibility process*.

The consistory may call a candidate for clarification of posture if necessary, i.e. if there is a recidivist failure between the candidate's first and second examination, the consistory may make the decision to call it to determine whether it is a matter of rebellion against the Word of God, a circumstantial error, or a lack of biblical understanding of a specific subject. The consistory retains the right to deliberate on certain cases, and to cancel the eligibility of those who consider to be rebellious before the Word of God.

Ability to teach

Those candidates who approve the doctrinal evaluation, and continue in the *eligibility process*, will enter the final stage of this. After being taught the principles of Biblical Interpretation, Exegesis and Communication, they shall prove their ability to teach others through choosing one of the following activities:

1. *Preaching*. The candidate will be provided with a biblical text, which will have the responsibility to preach either before the consistory or the congregation within a particular place and date set for it. This modality offers advantages and disadvantages. Among the advantages is that there is no interruption of speech or questions and answers. However, pressure, responsibility, and preparation work can be more arduous.
2. *Lecture*. The candidate who chooses this option will be given a theme and must develop a lecture of approximately 40 minutes, considering another 20 minutes for a question and answer session. This class will be presented to the consistory. Among the advantages of this modality is that the work of preparation can be less and simpler, as well as the audience. However, the hearing will ask questions,

they may interrupt the speaker, and may act as a foolish and contempt student, just as it may happen in a real class, so that the speaker's ability to keeping its temper and lovingly responding to these circumstances will be observed.

Whether for the preparation of a sermon or, for a class, the candidate may seek help from the means he believes pertinent, including ruling elders and pastoral team, however, at the time of the initiation of his presentation, aid will have ceased. The session will deliberate on the participant skills based on a matching sheet to make the methodology as objective as possible. The session shall approve or not the work of the candidate based on that matching sheet. This ability to teach has always been a hallmark of the true minister, as Bucer will also note in his chapter titled *The Ministers Christ Uses in His Church*, when speaking about *The Ministry of Teaching and Spiritual Discipline*.¹⁶

Elections

Bucer asserts that the elders should be supported by the congregation (*of the choice of the believers*),¹⁷ insofar they need to be loved and respected by them.¹⁸ Therefore, after all this academic process is completed, those candidates who have been approved by the consistory until this point have completed the *eligibility process* and have become an *eligible candidate for the elder's office*. At this point, the session by conferring its authorization for a certain *nominee* to be voted by the congregation is stating that it authorizes and endorses that such candidate is prepared and meets the biblical requirements to be a ruling elder for the church. Only those *eligible for the elder's office* may be presented to the congregation as such, and then be voted for the office. The session shall determine and set a date for the elections to take place and these shall proceed on the date provided that there is sufficient *quorum* to do so.

Ordination

Finally, those candidates who have been backed by the congregation to be elders of the church with most of the vows will be ordained by the ruling elders through the Biblical Act of the laying of hands. And

¹⁶ Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, 26.

¹⁷ Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, 42.

¹⁸ Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, 42.

they will protest as elders of Church. Bucer, in this matter comments that *hands are to be laid in only on those who are constantly marked out by the Holy Spirit working on them [...]*.¹⁹

Final Objectives

At the end, the whole process is aimed to develop GRAND leaders. This is but an acronym of those marks which characterize the labor of an elder:

1. **G**uides others toward Christ.
2. **R**estores those who have been lost.
3. **A**ssists those seriously struggling with sin or its consequences.
4. **N**ourishes the week flock.
5. **D**efends the flock from internal and external threats.

These five marks have been taken from Bucer's ideal of what a minister should do, which, at the same time, derives from a faithful exposition of Ezekiel 34:16.

In this regard, Bucer comments:

*From this it is evident that there are five main tasks required in the pastoral office and true care of souls. First: to lead to Christ our Lord [...] those who are still estranged from him, whether through carnal excess or false worship. Secondly: to restore those who had once be brought to Christ and into his church but have been drawn away again through affairs of the flesh or false doctrine. Thirdly: to assist in the true reformation of those who, remaining in the church of Christ have grievously fallen and sinned. Fourthly: to re-establish in true Christian strength and health those who [...] have become feeble and sick in the Christian life. Fifthly: to protect from all offence and falling away and continually encourage in all good things those who stay with the flock...*²⁰

Conclusion

This program is not intended to hinder the way to the position of elder of the church, but to fulfill the responsibility of caring for the church of Christ, ensuring, as far as possible, that the member who will be

¹⁹ Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, 45.

²⁰ Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, 70.

voted for this position of authority and leadership, and that will have in his hands the government, discipline, and doctrine of the church, among other matters of utmost importance, is a mature male of faith, who meets the requirements, and help to train him for the functions he will face in his arduous, yet precious ecclesial work of pastoring the flock.

This process, far from discouraging people for their care and meticulousness, should encourage those in whom God has placed the desire to serve as elders of his church, and bring peace to the church, that those men will be good stewards of the Church of our Lord Jesus Christ.

After all,

Since these servants of the Lord are to fulfil the work of our salvation in the church by the means of teaching, exhorting, warning, chastising, disciplining, pardoning, and all this through the dispensing of God's word [...] it is necessary that these ministers should as much as possible be trusted and respected by believers among whom they are to serve the Lord, and also that they be possessed by a genuine zealot be a faithful shepherds of Christ's sheep, and equipped with the requisite skills and the power of the Holy Spirit. This is why the greatest fear of God and the most earnest diligence are to be employed in the choice and installation of such men.²¹

²¹ Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, 41.

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