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Gospel Organization: The Church Leadership of Johannes Bugenhagen (1485–1558)

Martin J. Lohrmann¹

The historical marker over the parsonage door where Pastor Johannes Bugenhagen and centuries of successive Wittenberg pastors resided concludes by invoking Hebrews 13:7: “Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.” As the career of Rev. Dr. Gordon Jensen has abundantly shown, good leadership in the church is a gift of God to be cherished and honored. I am thankful for leaders and mentors like Dr. Jensen who have faithfully loved Christ and our neighbors in this world through gospel-centered teaching, scholarship, and ministry.

This paper celebrates such gospel-centered leadership by focusing on the ways that Pastor Bugenhagen—a longtime coworker of Martin Luther—served the church through his diligent organization of church structures in the early Lutheran Reformation. Although church administration is not a frequent topic of theological discourse, a focus on institutions begins by recognizing that the Holy Spirit gathers Christians as a collection of people who can do more together than alone. Indeed, the Augsburg Confession’s definition of the church itself as a gathering of people—“the assembly of all believers”²—invites us to connect the living, breathing *organism* that is the body of Christ with the institutional *organizing* that happens in the course of living out the Christian faith.

This historical and theological examination of Johannes Bugenhagen’s life and work will show how reformers valued the collective side of life together through adaptive approaches to church administration and servant leadership. Just as early Lutherans cherished preaching the gospel as sharing “the power of God for salvation,”³ contemporary communities of faith benefit from careful reflection upon the ways that theological values impact individuals and communities, especially as experienced through church institutions.

Pastoral Leadership

Johannes Bugenhagen had been a priest and a schoolteacher in Pomerania interested in the reforming spirit of Christian humanists like Erasmus of Rotterdam.⁴ With already more than a decade of experience teaching in monastic schools, Bugenhagen was so moved by some of Luther’s early writings that he moved to Wittenberg in the spring of 1521 to learn more about this new Reformation movement. The fact that Bugenhagen paused his career and left his homeland to go back to school at age thirty-five provides a good example of the lifelong learning and ongoing vocational discernment that Lutherans have always valued.

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² Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) [hereafter, BC], 42.1 (article 8).

³ Romans 1:17 (New Revised Standard Version).

⁴ Kurt K. Hendel, “Johannes Bugenhagen, Organizer of the Lutheran Reformation,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 18 (2004): 44–49.

Leaders in Wittenberg soon recognized that Bugenhagen had gifts to share with his new community. Bugenhagen had rented a room at Professor Philip Melanchthon's house and started a small Bible study on the Psalms with other students from northern Germany.⁵ These were the months following Luther's departure for his trial at the Diet of Worms and the ensuing exile at Wartburg Castle. During this time, the university needed a substitute teacher. In the autumn of 1521, Melanchthon recommended that Bugenhagen fill in for Luther, turning his small-group Psalms study into a college-level course. This made Bugenhagen both a student and a teacher at the university, personally modeling the ways in which teachers are always learning and students share their gifts with the entire community.

Bugenhagen's leadership role expanded when he was elected to be the head pastor of the Wittenberg City Church in 1523. A few things about this election are interesting, beginning with the fact that he had not been a first choice.⁶ Although the aptness of this call was confirmed by decades of effective ministry, it is worth pausing to notice that good church leadership sometimes arises from complicated and uncertain hiring processes: a first choice does not always mean a best choice; finding a candidate later in a search process need not mean they come with lesser qualifications. Beyond Bugenhagen's personal and professional merits, this election was also important because it was the first time that the Wittenberg city council elected its own pastor, setting a new Lutheran pattern of cooperation between church professionals and community members that remains valuable to this day.

Another interesting thing about Bugenhagen's call to ministry in Wittenberg is that he had married his wife Walpurga the previous year. By the time of the Reformation, the Latin Church had been forbidding clerical marriage for several centuries, with reasons described by Emperor Charles the Fifth's theological advisors in their Confutation of the Augsburg Confession.⁷ Based on the well-known personal and social harms caused by forced celibacy and their own study of the Bible and church history, early reformers believed that it was scripturally faithful for church leaders to marry and have families.⁸

With his own experience as a married priest, Bugenhagen contributed to the early Lutheran defense of clerical marriage with the publication of a 1525 tract entitled "Concerning the Marriage of Bishops and Deacons."⁹ In this work, Bugenhagen grounded his critique of clerical celibacy in Lutheran arguments against justification by works and affirmed marriage as a gift of God. Because ministers are human beings for whom Christ's promises, freedom, and blessings fully apply, faithful preachers of the gospel might join the laity in getting married with a good conscience; as Bugenhagen wrote, "the preaching of the gospel frees everyone to marry."¹⁰ The Lutheran reformers recognized that family life and sexuality can be healthy, God-pleasing aspects of Christian life and that the Holy Spirit is active in our families and intimate relationships.¹¹ In this way, Bugenhagen personally lived

⁵ Hendel, "Johannes Bugenhagen," 49–50.

⁶ Hendel, "Johannes Bugenhagen," 50.

⁷ "The Confutation of the Augsburg Confession," in *Sources and Contexts of The Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and James A. Nestingen (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 123–27.

⁸ On the marriage of priests, see BC 62–68 and 247–57.

⁹ Johannes Bugenhagen, *Selected Writings*, Vol. 2, trans. and ed. Kurt K. Hendel (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 843–986.

¹⁰ Bugenhagen, *Selected Writings*, Vol. 2:937.

¹¹ For more on the diverse experiences of women in the Reformation era (including negative experiences), see Kirsi I. Stjerna, ed., *Women Reformers of Early Modern Europe: Profiles, Texts, and Contexts* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv29sfwq3>, especially 315–82.

out changing ideas about ministry and marriage, testifying through his own life what it can look like when social and theological views of faith and sexuality receive important ongoing discernment.

As the head pastor in Wittenberg, Bugenhagen had to learn how to live into a new relationship with his teacher and mentor, Martin Luther. Although they were nearly the same age, Luther remained an important guide for Bugenhagen, who continued to call his colleague “Father Luther” over the years.¹² Even so, when Bugenhagen became Wittenberg’s head pastor, the roles and relationship took on new dynamics as Luther would then go to Bugenhagen for pastoral care. One example of this spiritual leadership occurred in the summer of 1527, when Luther had experienced both a severe physical illness and significant emotional distress. As Luther later recounted in a Table Talk,

Pomeranus [Bugenhagen] sometimes consoled me when I was sad by saying, “No doubt God is thinking: What more can I do with this man? I have given him so many excellent gifts, and yet he despairs of my grace.” These words were a great comfort to me. As a voice from heaven, they struck me in my heart, although I think Pomeranus did not realize at the time what he had said and that it was so well said.¹³

If effective church leadership means “speaking the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15) amid hard situations, then Bugenhagen was able to speak powerful words of both challenge and grace to his own longtime mentor, colleague, and friend, Martin Luther.

Bugenhagen was also Luther’s pastoral supervisor in a way, because one of Luther’s longstanding tasks in Wittenberg had been to preach in the City Church.¹⁴ Over the decades, when Bugenhagen was called out of town to help organize reforming communities, Luther would fill in and provide additional pulpit supply. The Large Catechism, for instance, began as a series of catechetical sermons that Luther preached in the City Church in 1528 while Bugenhagen was on an extended trip to introduce reforms in the city of Braunschweig.¹⁵ While some people might have found it intimidating to have Martin Luther on their pastoral staff, Bugenhagen had a steady confidence in his authority as a leader and in his call to preach law and gospel to everyone, including Luther.

Reform of Institutions

In addition to his work as Wittenberg’s head pastor, Bugenhagen proved to be very good at institutional reform on larger scales. One of the best examples of his organizational skills is his 1528 Church Order for the city of Braunschweig, whose city council had asked Bugenhagen to come and implement Reformation ideas and structures. Receiving approval from authorities in Wittenberg to temporarily relocate, Bugenhagen moved to Braunschweig for over a year, leaving Luther to be his supply pastor back in Wittenberg, as mentioned

¹² See Martin J. Lohrmann, *Bugenhagen’s Jonah: Biblical Interpretation as Public Theology* (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2012), 107–9.

¹³ Pelikan and Lehman, eds., *Luther’s Works*, American Edition (St. Louis and Philadelphia, 1955ff) [hereafter, LW], 54:15–16. See also, Martin Lohrmann, “Bugenhagen’s Pastoral Care of Martin Luther,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 24 (2010), 125–36.

¹⁴ Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: His Road to Reformation, 1483–1521*, translated by James L. Schaaf (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 150–51.

¹⁵ Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: Shaping and Defining the Reformation, 1521–1532*, trans. James L. Schaaf (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 274.

above. The fruit of Bugenhagen's efforts was a new church constitution for that city, which he later adapted for other places like Hamburg, Pomerania, and Denmark.

In the Braunschweig Church Order, Bugenhagen identified three points of institutional reform: good schools for the young, good preaching in the churches, and the establishment of a "common chest" to fund church operations and social ministries.¹⁶ Knowing that all these good things would need financial support, Bugenhagen invoked Jesus' words from 1 Timothy 5:18 that laborers deserve their wages to encourage people to pay pastors and teachers well. He explained the need for a common chest by recalling the works of mercy described in Matthew 25:31–40: "And what we give to Christ's least, Christ will remember on the Last Day as if it was bestowed on him."¹⁷ Passages like this are typical of the entire document, in which Bugenhagen—always the teacher—introduced new church reforms by describing their biblical rationale and practical implications.

For instance, this church order not only described how to establish new schools but also explained why the whole community benefits from educating its children, even though schools cost money. Connecting faith with funding, Bugenhagen contrasted the sinful greed in the story of the rich man and poor Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31) to the giving spirit with which the Braunschweiger council and community would establish local schools:

Here in Braunschweig the honorable council and the whole community see it as necessary to establish good schools before all other things and to pay honest, upright, learned schoolmasters and teachers to the honor of Almighty God, for the benefit of the youth, and in accordance with the will of the whole city. . . . In time there will emerge good schoolmasters; good preachers; good lawyers; good medical doctors; good, God-fearing, capable, honest, upright, obedient, friendly, learned, peaceful, not wild but joyful burghers who will also take care of their children in the best possible manner in the future, and so on from generation to generation.¹⁸

This passage connects theological and educational values in a way that shows an early Lutheran concern for both the care for souls and the common good. In Braunschweig, basic education would be offered to rich and poor, boys and girls, for the good of individuals, families, and the community: "in this way such teaching and good training of the children [will] be the same both for the rich and the poor."¹⁹

Medical care would similarly be made available for all people and not only for wealthy citizens. "No one should any longer be accepted into the wealthy hospitals by the payment of money. Rather, one should consider that the hospital has been established for the poor, old men and women burghers who otherwise have no support."²⁰ Bugenhagen also strongly supported the work of midwives, arranging for people of every economic level to have access to their care. Admonishing the people of Braunschweig to be proactive in their concern for public health, he wrote about the need for midwives, "Hence, the honorable city council will surely procure knowledgeable women and give them this responsibility so that there are as

¹⁶ Bugenhagen, *Selected Writings*, Vol. 2:1181–82.

¹⁷ Bugenhagen, *Selected Writings*, Vol. 2:1182.

¹⁸ Bugenhagen, *Selected Writings*, Vol. 2:1213–15.

¹⁹ Bugenhagen, *Selected Writings*, Vol. 2:1220. On the establishment of schools for both boys and girls, see Bugenhagen, *Selected Writings*, Vol. 2:1226–28.

²⁰ Bugenhagen, *Selected Writings*, Vol. 2:1398.

many good, experienced midwives here as are needed ... The midwives should be distributed throughout the city so that they can be found quickly.”²¹ With both pragmatic injunctions about the shared benefits of public health and Bible verses supporting care for those in the greatest need, Bugenhagen grounded institutional reform in spiritual values.

Bugenhagen also connected Lutheran religious beliefs with service to physical needs by establishing a “common chest,” which would pay for other social needs like hunger relief and firewood in the winter. He began his description of why people should give to the common chest by saying,

If we want to be Christians, we must prove this with fruit ... We should gladly accept every need of body and soul of our brothers [and sisters], whether they are rich or poor, as much as we are able, to their comfort ... The rich are particularly obliged to assist them, as Paul diligently commands them to learn in 1 Tim. 6[:17–19]. In addition, all artisans and workers whom God grants good fortune so that they can surely nourish themselves with the work of their hands, are also obliged to help, as Paul also teaches in Eph. 4[:28].²²

This direct approach to issues of wealth, poverty, and the social good shows how Bugenhagen could organize theology and money to serve real needs in the community. As Carter Lindberg observed, Bugenhagen’s “organizational genius was highly esteemed by his evangelical contemporaries ... His specific genius was to bind theology to exegesis and ecclesial praxis to the application of Scripture.”²³ Clear gospel-centered organization of financial systems like the common chest helped early Lutherans live out their faith in concrete, publicly accountable ways.

Reform of Church Authority

Along with educational reforms and social services, Bugenhagen’s own call shaped Lutheran views of the office of bishop. In 1533, Bugenhagen’s role expanded when he was made the supervisor for all the churches around Wittenberg. Traditionally, the name for the one who supervises area churches is “bishop.” In Germany at that time, however, many bishops were not only heads of the church but also rulers of secular government. Aristocratic leaders like Archbishop Albrecht of Mainz were literally “princes of the church.” With the title of bishop being so complicated, it could have been interpreted as a political act of aggression for Lutherans to start installing their own bishops and archbishops.

The word “bishop” comes from the Greek word *episkopos*, which means “overseer.” Because the early Lutherans could not use the title of bishop without controversy, they switched from the Greek word “bishop” to the Latin equivalent “superintendent.” As the new superintendent of the area around Wittenberg, Bugenhagen oversaw important church tasks like examining and ordaining candidates for ministry, finding honest leaders for the common chest, and matching congregations with good pastors.

Later in the 1530s, Bugenhagen became the general superintendent of all Electoral Saxony, making him essentially a Lutheran archbishop who coordinated all the other superintendents. Instead of viewing such roles as steps up a hierarchical ladder, early

²¹ Bugenhagen, *Selected Writings*, Vol. 2:1204; see also, Bugenhagen, *Selected Writings* Vol. 2:1397.

²² Bugenhagen, *Selected Writings*, Vol. 2:1378.

²³ Carter Lindberg, *Beyond Charity: Reformation Initiatives for the Poor* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 139–40.

Lutherans viewed such church authority as serving both good gospel teaching and practical forms of accountability. In the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, for instance, Philip Melancthon described the task of bishop as having two main focal points: oversight of good doctrine and responsibility for administrative effectiveness, including church discipline.²⁴

Bugenhagen's Braunschweig Church Order similarly described the office of superintendent as one of oversight:

Above all things we must and also want to have a superintendent, that is, an overseer, to whom, together with his assistant, the whole matter of all the preachers and the schools, whatever is related to teaching and unity, is commanded by the honorable council and by those established for this purpose by the community ... in order to oversee what is taught and where, etc.²⁵

Early Lutherans viewed structures of church governance as matters of freedom to be developed in context, caring about functional systems of oversight and accountability more than titles like bishop or superintendent. This has left an ongoing legacy of Lutherans being flexible about church polity for the sake of effective gospel witness in context.

Conclusion

Even though Bugenhagen's world was very different from ours in twenty-first-century North America, we can gain several valuable insights about gospel organization from his example. First, a church built on the gospel has options. A thirty-five-year-old schoolteacher can go back to school and help lead a Reformation movement. A priest can break powerful social conventions by getting married and still find a job. Vital social needs like hunger and health care can be identified and addressed through direct planning and action. Ecclesiastical structures can be flexible in order to provide essential servant leadership.

Second, good leadership matters immensely. In 1521, the people of Wittenberg were not asking or expecting someone like Bugenhagen to show up; but when he did, it did not take long to find things for him to do. He was not the first choice to serve as head pastor, but he was a good choice. Although Bugenhagen was not always sure how to be a pastor to a lifelong mentor like Martin Luther, he found a pastoral voice that worked for both of them by sharing scripture, prayer, and conversation. While Lutheran reformers were certainly powerful preachers and teachers, they were also skilled at putting these ideas into public practice. Bugenhagen in particular could take the Reformation slogan of justification by faith alone and connect it to good fruits of faith, like the establishment of effective systems that serve the common good.

Bugenhagen personally embodied early forms of the institutional Lutheran church. As a believer set free by the Reformation message of justification by faith alone, he was among the first reforming priests who got married. As head pastor of the Wittenberg City Church, he oversaw the reform of worship, preaching, and service at the congregational level. As local superintendent, he oversaw ordinations, call processes, and congregational cooperation. Then, as general superintendent for all of Saxony, he served as point person on

²⁴ BC 290.12–13. See also, "Instructions for the Visitors of Parish Pastors in Electoral Saxony," LW 40:313–14.

²⁵ Bugenhagen, *Selected Writings*, Vol. 2:1232.

matters of faith and public affairs. He wrote new church constitutions for cities, regions, and even a kingdom. Amidst it all, he was the kind of servant leader who could be an archbishop without caring that Lutherans in his area did not use that title.

Through the witness of reformers like Luther and Bugenhagen, we meet people who have known and shared the good things of God that come through faith in Christ. Facing tremendous opposition and obstacles, they found ways to share Christ's good news with others in words, in deeds, and even in their institutions and church structures. As present day leaders—including Gordon Jensen, whose servant leadership we honor in this Festschrift—have continued to show, it is a privilege and gift to have a place in the living, breathing, loving gospel organism, and organization, called the church.