



***Bugenhagen  
Reformer's Pastor***

*by Edward Kettner*

**W**hen the Reformation began in 1517, Martin Luther was not alone. A member of the faculty at the University of Wittenberg, he already had colleagues who supported him in his discovery of the Gospel. He certainly became prominent in the aftermath of the writing and publishing of the 95 Theses on indulgences, and he indeed spearheaded many changes, particularly in his debates and disputations, which put the issues of justification and the abuses of the papacy to the forefront of people's minds. He wrote the catechisms to assure proper instruction in the faith for the parishes, and his preaching and speaking as well as the publication of his writings, along with his translation of the Bible into German, made him one of the world's most influential men in history.

As time progressed, Luther found that he needed more and more to rely on others who also correctly understood the Gospel. He had others with whom he worked and dialogued, and without them the Reformation would not have succeeded in the way that it did. One of Luther's significant colleagues was Johann Bugenhagen, also known as Dr. Pomeranus, who was a pastor for many years in the city of Wittenberg. He was an author, lecturer, and theologian in his own right. He also served as father-confessor to Luther, as well as being one of Luther's closest friends.

Bugenhagen was born in Wollin in the duchy of Pomerania on June 24, 1485. Pomerania straddles the border of Germany and Poland, and currently is divided between the two. Modern Wolin is located in Poland. He was educated as a teacher at the University of Greifswald (1502-1504). He studied liberal arts, not theology, and began his career as a teacher. After two years as rector of the school in Treptow on the Rega (in western Pomeria, currently northwest Poland), he was ordained in 1507 as priest of St. Mary's Church in Treptow, and later became vicar of the college of clergy there.

In 1517 his canon appointed him to be biblical lecturer at Belbuck Abbey, located nearby, where he became part of the Humanist circle. Note that "humanism" in this context refers to the study and development of the humanities, with particular emphasis on the classical languages of Greek and Latin, with a revival of the study of Hebrew beginning to take place as well. While there, at the behest of the Duke

of Pomerania, Bugenhagen began writing a history of Pomerania in Latin.

Bugenhagen first became aware of Luther's thought in 1520 when he read Luther's prelude to *On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church*. Here Luther, holding to Scripture rather than church tradition and emphasizing Christ's institution, reduced the number of sacraments from seven to two and rejected Rome's understanding, which saw the sacraments as churchly rites geared to enable and empower people to earn merit before God, rather than as being vehicles by which God gives His people the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. At first, he thought Luther to be a horrible heretic. However, after more thought he concluded that the entire world was blind, and only Luther could see the truth. As a result of his acceptance of

Luther's thought, he moved to Wittenberg.

Bugenhagen arrived in Wittenberg while Luther was still at the Wartburg. (Luther was at the Wartburg from May of 1521 to March of 1522, in hiding after the Diet of Worms.) Bugenhagen married in October 1522. He and his wife Walpurga were blessed with three children. (One of them, Johannes the younger, became a professor at the University of Wittenberg.) In 1523 Bugenhagen was elected pastor of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, making him Luther's pastor and father confessor. In his *Table Talks*, Luther once remarked how "Pomeranus" (Bugenhagen) spoke gently and humorously to him during his bouts of melancholy, thereby bringing comfort to him and assuring

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He also noted that Bugenhagen was an excellent preacher. He once stated, "Dr. Pomeranus is sufficiently full and solid in his sermons. On the other hand, I am thin and dry. When I hear Pomeranus, he gives me many commonplaces on which my thoughts may roam, and therefore he is a very good preacher." In addition to his pastoral work, his private lectures proved so popular and successful that in 1523 he was also appointed a lecturer at the University of Wittenberg.

Bugenhagen's scholarship led him to become one of those scholars who assisted Luther in his translation of the Bible, and in 1524 he gave a thorough response to Swiss reformer Ulrich Zwingli, defending the real presence of Christ's body and blood in the Lord's Supper against Zwingli's denials. (This work has just become available in English, published by Repristination Press.)

The respect Bugenhagen received from others can be seen in the tasks to which he was appointed. In preparation for the Diet of Augsburg in 1530, called by the emperor to deal with matters ranging from the encroachment of the Turks into the empire to the “Lutheran heresy,” John the Steadfast, Elector of Saxony, appointed Bugenhagen, along with Luther, Philip Melanchthon, and Justus Jonas, to prepare a set of articles outlining the abuses to which the Lutherans (“Protestants”) objected. These articles came to be called the “Torgau Articles,” and served as the basis for the latter section of the Augsburg Confession.

One of Bugenhagen’s major tasks after the Diet of Augsburg was to make good use of his administrative skills, and so aid in the establishment of reform in Northern Germany, and to assist in the development of new church orders (liturgy and church administration) for territorial churches. Luther for the most part remained in Wittenberg, engaged in the work of professor. Nevertheless, Luther found Bugenhagen so important to him that in November 1531 Luther asked him to return to Wittenberg from the North.

It was in the 1530s that the work began in earnest to prepare pastors for the congregations subscribing to the tenets of the Reformation, and to examine, ordain, and place them in congregations. Since Rome refused to ordain pastors who held to the Gospel of free grace as taught by the Reformers, it became necessary for the Lutheran churches to find a means of preparing their own clergy. This meant providing fully-qualified doctoral chairs in theology. Therefore in 1533, Bugenhagen, along with Johannes Aepinus and Kaspar Cruciger, became the first Protestant doctors of theology at the University of Wittenberg.

In 1537, Lutheran theologians met together at the city of Smalcald (Schmalkalden), where Luther presented a set of articles (now contained in the Book of Concord) which were proposed for discussion at an expected church council to be held at Mantua. (In fact,

the council did not begin until 1545, and then at Trent). Here Bugenhagen, along with the other theologians present, signed a statement affirming the truth of the Augsburg Confession and the Apology thereof, as well as signing the Smalcald Articles—all three documents would come to be part of the Book of Concord.

It was in Smalcald that Luther became ill because of a large kidney stone. His friends thought he was dying, and Bugenhagen showed both his friendship to Luther and his pastoral care for him by hearing what everyone thought would be Luther’s last confession. Luther declared that his only concern was that the Gospel would be preserved and continue to be faithfully preached. He particularly prayed for those whose task it would be to continue to preserve the Gospel.

Luther lived for another nine years after the incident in Smalcald. After Luther’s death in February of 1546

in Eisleben, his body was brought back to Wittenberg, and there it was that Bugenhagen preached Luther’s funeral sermon. It was in this sermon that Bugenhagen declares Luther to be the “angel” (messenger) of Revelation 14:6-7, who had an eternal Gospel, and proclaimed, “Fear God and give Him honor.” This passage has become the First Reading for Reformation Day.

A l m o s t immediately after Luther’s death, the Schmalkaldic Wars broke out, which

put great stress on the supporters of the Reformation, especially during the time when the Emperor’s forces held sway over Protestant territories. Bugenhagen as pastor of the Castle Church continued to preach the Gospel of grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, and also took care of Luther’s family after Luther’s death. Bugenhagen died on 20 April 1558 (twelve years after Luther) in Wittenberg, a faithful preacher and teacher to the end.

**Rev. Dr. Edward G. Kettner** is Professor Emeritus of Systematic Theology at Concordia Lutheran Seminary (Edmonton).



The reformers translate the Bible together into German. Left to right are Melanchthon, Luther, Bugenhagen, and Cruciger.