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

By Martin Lohrmann

Good morning! I’m Dr. Martin Lohrmann, church history professor at Wartburg Seminary in Dubuque. It’s a pleasure to be with you for this Northeastern Iowa Synod assembly. On this big day of a bishop’s election, we’ll get things started by thinking about a key leader of the Lutheran Reformation, Johannes Bugenhagen. Why start our day with a little-known reformer from the 1500s? Two words: Gospel Organization.

Johannes Bugenhagen was an early coworker in the Lutheran Reformation. He was the head pastor in the main church in Wittenberg, which made him Martin Luther’s pastor. Can you imagine being Martin Luther’s pastor? Bugenhagen knew what it meant to preach the gospel and lead the church during challenging times. He also had outstanding skills in church administration and found effective ways to put Lutheran theology into practice.

Gospel organization matters because the Holy Spirit has gathered us as a group of people, the church, who can do more together than we can do alone. Together we belong to the living, breathing, complicated *organism* that is the body of Christ. As a gospel *organization*, the health of our church institutions is worth caring about. Bugenhagen’s skills as a gospel-centered organizer make him a great person from Lutheran history to spend time with today.

I first got interested in Bugenhagen because I wanted to learn more about the colleagues of the Reformation. Martin Luther didn’t work alone. He had friends and coworkers, and Pastor Bugenhagen was one of those longtime colleagues. Bugenhagen had been a priest and a schoolteacher in northern Germany.[[1]](#footnote-1) After reading Luther’s books, he moved to Wittenberg in the spring of 1521 (exactly 500 years ago this year!) to learn more about the new Reformation teachings. At age 35, Bugenhagen the teacher paused his career and went back to school, a good example of the lifelong learning that Lutherans have always valued.

Leaders in Wittenberg recognized that Bugenhagen had gifts to share. When he first moved to town, he was renting a room at Professor Philip Melanchthon’s house and started a small Bible study on the Psalms with other students from northern Germany. Luther had just left for his trial at the Diet of Worms and then had to go into exile for almost a year at Wartburg Castle. The university needed a substitute teacher. It wasn’t long before Melanchthon recommended that Bugenhagen fill in for Luther, turning his small-group Psalms study into a college class. This made Bugenhagen both a student and a teacher at the university. It’s kind of a mixed-up role, but that’s often how life goes: teachers are always learning and students frequently share their gifts with entire community.

Bugenhagen’s role in town expanded when he was elected to be the head pastor of the Wittenberg City Church in 1523. A few things about his election are interesting. For starters, he had not been the first choice; he was maybe the third choice, but other candidates said no for various reasons and eventually Luther suggested Bugenhagen for the job. I like this, because it can be easy in retrospect to assume that everything in the past worked out the way it was supposed to. But Bugenhagen’s election shows that things were just as up-in-the-air back then as they are now. Things worked out well, as Bugenhagen served as an effective head pastor there for over thirty years. It’s good to see that the Holy Spirit can work through complicated election processes.

Bugenhagen’s election was also important because it was the first time that the Wittenberg city council elected their own pastor. This set a new Lutheran pattern of cooperation between church professionals and church members. We’re in this together! We’re participating in that same shared care for the church in today’s election, with lay members and rostered leaders coming together to elect a new bishop.

A third interesting thing about Bugenhagen’s election is that he had gotten married the year before. Priests in medieval Europe hadn’t been allowed to be married for hundreds of years. The Catholic Church then and now had many biblical and traditional reasons for why priests should not be married. Based on their study of scripture and church history, though, Lutherans decided that it was scripturally faithful for church leaders to have families. They recognized from the Bible and experience that sexuality can be a healthy part of Christian life and that the Holy Spirit is active in our families and intimate relationships. In this way, Bugenhagen personally lived out changing ideas about ministry and sexuality, which is a good example for us as we continue to discern healthy relationships between faith and sexuality.

As a leader, Bugenhagen learned to live into a new relationship with Martin Luther, whose ideas had literally changed his life. Luther remained an inspirational mentor for Bugenhagen all his life. Even so, when Bugenhagen became the pastor, the roles and relationship changed. Luther now went to Bugenhagen for pastoral care. Bugenhagen was also Luther’s supervisor in a way, because one of Luther’s jobs was being an assistant preacher at the City Church. If Bugenhagen went out of town, Luther would fill in for him. How would you like to have Luther as your substitute? Some people might find that intimidating, but Bugenhagen had a good sense of himself and his call to preach the gospel to everyone, including Luther.

In addition to his work as Wittenberg’s head pastor, Bugenhagen proved to be very good at church administration. He knew that our institutions matter, because we can do more together than we can alone.

One of the best examples of Bugenhagen’s organizational skills is his 1528 Church Order for the city of Braunschweig. (Yes, that’s the city that Braunschweiger sausage is named after.)

The city government asked him to come help reform the churches there. So Bugenhagen moved to Braunschweig for over a year (leaving Luther to be his supply pastor back in Wittenberg) and wrote them new church constitution. He later adapted this work for other places like Hamburg, Pomerania, and Denmark.

This Braunschweig Church Order identifies three practical 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. Knowing that all these good things would need financial support, Bugenhagen invoked invoking Jesus’ words from Luke 10 that laborers deserve. 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.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Passages like this are typical of the entire document, in which Bugenhagen—always the teacher—presented new church reforms together with biblical support and practical reasoning.

The Braunschweig Church Order also explained why the whole community benefits from educating its children, even though schools cost money. Connecting faith with funding, Bugenhagen told the story of the rich man and poor Lazarus from Luke 16. Then he said why schools are worth the effort and expense:

…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 buy 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.[[3]](#footnote-3)

This passage connects spiritual 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 was offered to rich and poor, boys and girls, for the good of individuals, families, and the community. It would be paid for by a progressive tax system that recognized that those who could give more should give more. In this way, a biblical vision of social wellbeing matched the particularities of a local day-to-day organization.

Bugenhagen also connected Lutheran faith with physical needs through a “common chest, which would pay for social needs like hunger relief, firewood, and health care. He introduced how people with more would use the common chest to help those in need 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].”[[4]](#footnote-4) 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. In Christ, we are not our own. We belong to each other. Clear gospel organization of financial systems like the common chest help us share life in this world that God so loves so much.

Along with educational reforms and social services, Bugenhagen personally shaped new ways for Lutherans to see the traditional role of bishops. His job in Wittenberg expanded in 1533 when he was made the supervisor for all the churches around Wittenberg. Traditionally, the name of the job for supervising area churches is a bishop. But in Germany at that time, a lot of bishops were not only heads of the church but of secular government, as well. Leaders like Archbishop Albrecht of Mainz were literally princes of the church. With the title of bishop being so complicated, it might have been an act of aggression for Lutherans to start installing their own bishops.

The word bishop comes from the Greek word *episkopos*, which means “overseer.” Because the early Lutherans couldn’t use the title of bishop without controversy, they simply switched from the Greek word “bishop” to the Latin word “superintendent,” which means the same thing. As the new superintendent of the area around Wittenberg, Bugenhagen oversaw important church issues 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 of Saxony, making him basically a Lutheran archbishop who coordinated the other superintendents. For the reformers, these church structures helped lead Holy Spirit values like mutual accountability and consistency. The guiding ideas for Bugenhagen’s church leadership, then, wasn’t “have we built the right structure?” but rather “do our structures serve gospel faith and service?” In the Lutheran tradition, we don’t worship our institutions. But we do love the gospel of Jesus Christ so much that we are even willing to get organized to share it more effectively in word and deed.

Even though Bugenhagen’s world was very different from ours, we can gain several valuable insights about gospel organization from his example. First, a church built on the gospel has options. A 35-year-old schoolteacher can go back to school and join a Reformation movement. A married priest can get a job. Social needs can be named and addressed effectively. Lutherans can have bishops, whether or not they use the name. In Christ, we have so much freedom and grace to be the living gospel organism the Holy Spirit has created us to be. The world needs and deserves this kind of gospel organization.

Second, good leadership matters. People in Wittenberg weren’t expecting someone like Bugenhagen to show up, but when he did, it didn’t take them long to find things for him to do. He wasn’t the first choice for head pastor, but he was a good choice. He wasn’t quite sure how to be a pastor to a major person in his life like Luther, but by sharing scripture, prayer, and conversation together, he found a pastoral voice that worked. It takes a real leader to tell someone like Luther things they might not initially want to hear! In a more public way, when places like Braunschweig and Denmark asked for help implementing the Reformation, the reformers didn’t pass up the call to lead: they actively got to know the situation, were very clear about what it means to keep the gospel central, and worked with local officials to create policies that would work in real life.

The gospel matters, leadership matters, and effective organizing and institutions matter. Yes, the Lutheran reformers were powerful preachers and teachers. And they were also amazing at putting these ideas into practice. Bugenhagen in particular could take the Reformation slogan of justification by faith alone and connect it to the good fruits of faith, like care for the poor, establishing schools, supporting public health care, and finding ways to pay for it all. He was clear about confronting greed and selfishness in the church and clear that following Jesus means loving our neighbors as ourselves in word and deed. As First John 3:18 says, “Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.”

Even more than Martin Luther, whose main public role was professor of theology, Bugenhagen personally embodied the institutional Lutheran church. What kind of institutional figure was he? 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 the point person when it came to the church and public affairs. He wrote new church constitutions for cities, regions, and even a kingdom. In the midst of it all, he was the kind of servant leader who could be an archbishop without caring that he didn’t have the title.

I hope you’ve learned some cool things this morning about an early Lutheran leader whose career as a reformer began exactly 500 years ago this spring, when Bugenhagen as a 35-year-old priest and teacher went back to school to learn more about what they were doing in Wittenberg. As you probably noticed, Bugenhagen’s life and work isn’t just some interesting historical trivia for me. I’d like to bring this talk to a close by naming some of my personal passion and investment in studying a church leader like him.

For one thing, I love how Lutherans from the Reformation to the present have shared the story of Jesus Christ crucified and risen, whose love for each one of us and for the whole world is given freely and received simply by trusting it like a newborn baby trust its loving mother. This good news has changed my life for the better countless times and continues to inspire and guide me every day. So it’s been hard for me that the messages I’ve heard most about the church in my lifetime are things like “Woe is us, things aren’t like they used to be, and the church is dying.” That’s unfaithful and untrue. The church of Jesus Christ can never die, and neither the gates of hell nor religious trends in 21st-century America will prevail against it.

Every generation of the church changes. That’s okay. As the prophet says in Isaiah 40, “The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” Yes, there are social factors in our time that are largely beyond our control. Yes, our church communities might look different going forward than they have in the past. But if we’re where Jesus is, then we’re in the right place, no matter what else is going on around us. And so many great things are, in fact, happening in our churches, and I want to say “Thank you” for your part in those great gospel experiences. If exciting things aren’t happening, then in Christian faith, we’re entirely free to pause, ask in prayer and conversation about what the Spirit might be stirring up next, and get on board. We are not held captive to uninspiring institutions and boring messages… that’s not what Jesus came for! Instead, with the eyes of faith, we can see that our healthy institutions are nothing other than us and the Holy Spirit in motion, doing more together than we can on our own.

That’s an exciting place to be. It also happens to match Luther’s explanation of “thy kingdom come” in the Small Catechism. Luther wrote, “God’s kingdom comes on its own without our prayer, but we ask in this prayer that it may also come to us.”[[5]](#footnote-5) We don’t need to work impossible miracles to create the kingdom of God on earth or save the church. We’re not obliged to carry the church like an unwelcome burden on our backs. By no means! The Holy Spirit creates and sustains the church. We have been blessed to be people who pray with all our heart, mind, and strength that we keep getting to be part of it.

In the witness of reformers like Luther, Melanchthon, and Bugenhagen, I see people who lived through really hard times. They knew how faith in Jesus could make things better. Facing tremendous opposition and obstacles, they found ways to share Christ’s good news with others in words and deeds, and even—if can you believe it—in their institutions and church structures. Near the ends of their lives, they sometimes wondered if their labors had been in vain, but they followed Christ and kept on preaching, teaching, leading, and organizing, trusting God to give the growth. In case we wonder about what our next steps might be, we need only look to Jesus. As Bugenhagen wrote near the end of his life when the future of the Reformation was still very uncertain: “Christ is our kingdom of God and the kingdom of heaven.”[[6]](#footnote-6) When we’re with him, we are in the right place, as individual believers and as members of this living, breathing, awesome gospel organism and organization, the church.

Thank you very much for your attention. Thank you for your ministries in this synod. Blessings to you this day. Peace.

1. For a good introductory article about Bugenhagen’s life and organizing skills, see Kurt K. Hendel, “Johannes Bugenhagen, Organizer of the Lutheran Reformation,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 18 (2004), 43-75. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Johannes Bugenhagen, *Selected Writings*, Volume 2, edited and translated by Kurt K. Hendel (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 1182. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Bugenhagen, *Selected Writings*, 2:1213-1215. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Bugenhagen, *Selected Writings*, 2:1378. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. BC 356.7, second petition. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Martin Lohrmann, *Bugenhagen’s Jonah: Biblical Interpretation as Public Theology* (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2012), 199. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)