
Faith...and Good Works!

The Formation of the Lutheran Church through J. Bugenhagen

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On the retirement of Kurt Hendel

and the publication of his 2-volume edition of Bugenhagen's Selected Writings

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Thank you very much for the chance to be with you today to celebrate the work of Dr. Kurt Hendel and his publication of Johannes Bugenhagen's *Selected Writings*.¹ I bring greetings from President Louise Johnson of Wartburg Seminary and from Wartburg's faculty. As a pastor and now a seminary professor, I value collegiality as a blessing and gift from God.

Care for collegiality is actually how I came to be—along with Dr. Hendel—one of the few scholars in North America to spend a good deal of time with Johannes Bugenhagen Pomeranus, pastor and professor in Wittenberg during the Reformation.

Part 1: Why Bugenhagen?

Why Bugenhagen? During my first call as a pastor in Ohio, I went to Germany with a church group to see historical sites from medieval, Reformation, and modern history. When we were in Wittenberg at a talk with Martin Treu of the Luther House museum, Dr. Treu offhandedly said something like, "You know, Luther didn't work alone. He had a lot of people working together with him." Maybe it seems obvious that the Reformation included teamwork, but it immediately struck me as something I wanted to learn more about.

When I was preparing to move to Philadelphia to start my Ph.D. program about a year after that, I met a missionary pastor serving in Tanzania, Pastor Reinhard Friedrich, who was a native of Hamburg. When I told him of my interest in learning about Luther's colleagues, he lit up because Bugenhagen had helped reform the church in Hamburg. Shortly after our meeting, Pastor Friedrich sent me a little book about Bugenhagen. From that book, I gained a basic grasp of Bugenhagen's life and work, which I'll share now just so we have common footing.

Johannes Bugenhagen was born on June 24, 1485, on the island of Wollin, where the Oder River empties into the Baltic Sea. Today Wollin is just on the Polish side of the border with Germany. In the 1500s, it was in the duchy of Pomerania, the territory that gave Bugenhagen his nickname, Dr. Pomeranus.

1. Johannes Bugenhagen, *Selected Writings*, two volumes, edited and translated by Kurt K. Hendel (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015).

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After some study at the University of Greifswald, Bugenhagen took a position as a teacher not far from his hometown. He was ordained a priest in 1509. He was influenced in church reform through the humanist scholarship and moral philosophy of Erasmus of Rotterdam. In 1520—at age 35—Bugenhagen encountered Luther's *Babylonian Captivity of the Church*. After wrestling with it, Bugenhagen became convinced about Luther's views. He wrote to Luther, asking about a *modus vivendi*, a way of life for the moral reform of Christians. In response, Luther sent a copy of his latest book with a short note that said:

You have written that I should prescribe for you a *modus vivendi*. True Christians do not need moral precepts, for in faith the Spirit leads them to everything which God wills and which brotherly love demands. Read this therefore. Not all believe the gospel. Faith is perceived in the heart.²

The new book Luther sent Bugenhagen was *The Freedom of a Christian*, which examines the twin notions that in Christ believers are at once entirely free and entirely bound to serve others. To describe Luther's teaching in a contemporary scientific image: Christian freedom and Christian service are like the double helix of a Christian life, always distinct yet complementary.

Within a few months of this exchange with Luther, Bugenhagen left his job and homeland to learn more at the University of Wittenberg. He took a room at Philip Melanchthon's house, which quickly led to Melanchthon's discovery of this good teacher in their midst. Soon, Bugenhagen was teaching classes, filling in for Luther who was then in hiding at Wartburg Castle after the Diet

2. Johannes Bugenhagen, *Dr. Johannes Bugenhagens Briefwechsel*, edited by Otto Vogt (Stettin: Saunier, 1888; reprint, Hildesheim: Olms, 1966), 8 (no. 3, 1520).

of Worms. Bugenhagen was elected pastor of the Wittenberg City Church in October 1523. In short, he quickly became a valued colleague in church reform.

As I began my studies, Dr. Hendel's writings on Bugenhagen—especially essays that appeared in *Lutheran Quarterly* and *Currents in Theology and Mission*—continued to pique my interest, particularly the way he described Bugenhagen's ability to connect faith with practice. Those essays are now nicely summarized in Dr. Hendel's historical introduction to the *Selected Writings*, "Johannes Bugenhagen: Reformer beyond the Limelight," which is valuable in itself as a thorough overview of the reformer's life.³

My doctoral research took place way back in the last decade when not everything was on the internet yet. To learn more, I hunkered down with the ancient microfilm and microfiche machine and read whatever I could find by Bugenhagen. Through these texts, the Reformation opened to me in a new way, because I was seeing it through the words and experiences of one of Luther's coworkers. No longer was Reformation history a matter of just wrestling with Luther, the lone giant. Instead, the Reformation became a living conversation about the nature of faith and the gospel, and how to share, teach, and live it in meaningful ways. Luther is there, but so are Bugenhagen, Philip Melancthon, Justus Jonas, Katie Luther, Lucas Cranach, Caspar Cruciger, and many others.

I have personal joy in Dr. Hendel's publication of Bugenhagen's works, because I would sometimes be reading a piece by Bugenhagen that I found very exciting. I remember at least two times sending emails to Dr. Hendel along the lines of "Dear Dr. Hendel, do you know if anyone has considered translating this Bugenhagen text into English?" To which he would reply, "Yes, I'm working on it." So I experienced some delayed gratification myself when his two-volume edition of Bugenhagen's *Selected Writings* appeared last summer.

The best thing I can say about Dr. Hendel's translation is that the texts in English sound and feel like Bugenhagen. Bugenhagen had a distinctive writing voice that I would characterize as conversational. He writes like a good teacher who takes students on an educational journey. He doesn't use much flowery or technical theological language, but he takes time to describe key concepts in clear and understandable ways. When I read Dr. Hendel's translation, that side of Bugenhagen's skill as a pastor and teacher stands out.

An example of this Bugenhagenian style appears in the church order for the city of Braunschweig. Church orders were like the church constitutions of the day, except even more comprehensive, because a parish was both a religious and political entity. During the Reformation, these church orders described the faith that would be taught and preached in the congregations, set out the worship and sacramental life of the community, and arranged ways to establish and fund things like public schools, hospitals, poor relief, and salaries for teachers, musicians, and preachers. The Church Order for Braunschweig was an important early contribution to

that genre of Reformation writings. Bugenhagen wrote it at the request of the local city council in 1528, while on an extended leave of absence from his parish in Wittenberg.

Near the beginning of the Braunschweig church order, Bugenhagen explained why the order was so long (it is over 200 pages long in the Hendel edition). "This book has become so large," he wrote, "because I always explain the reason for the particular matters that are prescribed and have written much there about a number of matters of my teaching from God's word... When I leave, the burghers may now read in their homes regarding several abuses about which I preached among them. Thus I may put to shame a bit the devil who, over time, would gladly instill in his comrades that I had taught differently regarding such matters."⁴ Bugenhagen thus described the new church constitution as a teaching document. Readers would be able to read and revisit not only how a church is arranged but why it matters that a community hold onto a clear statement of faith and support public servants like good preachers, teachers, musicians and midwives.

Bugenhagen did the same kind of public teaching when he was in Copenhagen to help reform the Danish church in 1537. Since Denmark had just come out of a violent civil war, part of Bugenhagen's task was to re-stabilize public life. Therefore, although King Christian III had won the war and been confirmed in his office by the Danish assembly the previous year, Bugenhagen presided over Christian's coronation ceremony when he arrived in Copenhagen in the summer of 1537. In this case, the Wittenberg pastor found himself functioning in the role of a medieval archbishop. In an account of the coronation that he seems to have written himself, Bugenhagen provided running commentary about the liturgical actions as they took place, especially when bestowing various signs of the office such as royal clothing, sword, scepter, and imperial orb upon the king. When each of these items was given, Bugenhagen added words of teaching. This was particularly true when it came to a sign of the king's earthly authority such as the sword. While affirming responsible secular authority, Bugenhagen also wanted to put the role of armed power in its place, making a nice play on words by saying, "today is called the coronation and not the 'swordination'" (in German, *der Krönung und nicht der Schwerdtung*).⁵ This was his way of saying that political and physical power is only part of what it means to lead a people. When it came to the crown itself, Bugenhagen offered many observations about what a crown signifies, before telling Christian,

And one more thing, my dear Lord, that I almost forgot, and this is the best thing about the crown, even though no goldsmith thinks about it and the world does not notice it. That is: the crown opens at the top to heaven, so that above king, queen, land and nobility God alone should reign from heaven. Therefore, keep God before your eyes, listen to and learn from his word, so that he

4. *Selected Writings*, Vol. 2, 1185.

5. Karl August Traugott Vogt, *Johannes Bugenhagen Pomeranus: Leben und ausgewählte Schriften* (Friderichs: Elberfeld, 1867), 380.

3. *Selected Writings*, Vol. 1, 1–75.

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will bless you with peace and prosperity in this earthly kingdom; as Christ says, “Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you” [Matthew 6:33].⁶

These moments from the coronation reveal important traits about Bugenhagen, especially his care for good order, pastoral approach, great familiarity with the Bible, and fondness for teaching in any situation. His coronation of King Christian and Queen Dorothy stands as a unique moment in Reformation history and offers valuable insights into his working theology as a first-generation reformer.

Dr. Hendel’s volume also shows how Bugenhagen’s perspective gives a fresh view of Luther’s legacy. Here was a pastor who frequently sat at Luther’s table. They talked theology, worked together as faculty administrators and church reformers, and preached from the same pulpit. Bugenhagen presided at the wedding between Martin and Katie, heard Luther’s confessions, announced God’s forgiveness to him, and shared countless personal griefs, concerns, and joys. After Luther died, Bugenhagen preached at Luther’s funeral through tears, acknowledging the great loss and yet pointing people to the same faith in Christ that had shaped and guided Luther’s own life.

Luther and the Reformation look different through Bugenhagen’s eyes because—while Bugenhagen certainly admired Luther—he also knew why they had worked so hard together. He could explain gospel ideas and values in his own voice: the Reformation was not about a charismatic, sometimes mercurial leader named Martin Luther; instead, it was about the conviction that Jesus Christ changes hearts and changes the world. While we rightly study the social, political, theological aspects and implications of the Reformation and Luther’s thought, the reformers themselves primarily wanted to point people to the saving relationship of trust in a Lord who died for sinners and who justifies the ungodly out of pure grace.

Luther himself frequently tried to remind people that the Reformation was not about him but about knowing Christ. But because he was such a pivotal figure in his own time and has been ever since, it can be hard to hear his objections to a cult of personality. His words, his writings, and even the random things he said while hanging out with friends have come down to us with near

6. Vogt, 389.

canonical status. This is true not just for people who are sympathetic to Luther but also for those who disagree with him. If you want to add weight to something, whether pro or con, just start your sentence with “Luther said...” In many ways, Luther often serves as a strawman for all manner of contemporary projections, whether positive or negative.

“Bugenhagen said” does not carry the same weight. That can be refreshing. If you read all 1300 pages of Bugenhagen’s *Selected Writings*, you will encounter many places where you might think “that sure sounds old-fashioned” or “as a twenty-first century Christian I do not agree with that” or “I understand, but I would not say it that way.” And that would be legitimate, because Bugenhagen very obviously lived and died in a foreign context 500 years ago. I have never heard anyone have a fight over Bugenhagen’s theology. I have not heard anyone imagine that we could solve contemporary conflicts if only we understood Bugenhagen better. And yet, this is what often happens with Luther. Seeing the Reformation through Bugenhagen’s eyes and through the perspective of other contemporaries can help renew our engagement with Luther and the Reformation. Rather than serving as a distant authority to be either loved or feared, Luther becomes a companion in our Christian journeys today, like he was with Bugenhagen and other colleagues. This approach provides a historically informed, liberating, and inviting way to experience Luther.

Part 2: Faith and good works

Having named some of the reasons for celebrating Dr. Hendel’s publication of Bugenhagen’s *Selected Writings*, I would like to move to the specific theme of this paper: the relationship between faith and good works. This was Bugenhagen’s specialty. Recalling Bugenhagen’s early interests as a reforming humanist priest, we notice that the question of faith and how to live it out had long been personally significant for him. As a pastor and theologian in Wittenberg, the relationship between faith and good works remained at the heart of his reforming efforts.

This theme should not be too surprising. After all, Luther and Melancthon also wrote frequently and passionately about this topic. Some prominent examples from Luther on this topic include his famous formulation in *The Freedom of a Christian*: “A Christian is lord of all, completely free of everything. A Christian is a servant, completely attentive to the needs of all.”⁷ Faith at once frees people from all that would keep them bound and sends them to serve others selflessly and unconditionally. Another example comes from Luther’s preface to Romans: “O it is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, this faith. It is impossible for it not to be doing good works incessantly. It does not ask whether good works are to be done, but before the question is asked, it has already done them, and is constantly doing them.”⁸ On the importance

7. Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian*, translated by Mark Tranvik (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), 50.

8. Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works, American Edition*, 55 vols., edited by J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, (Philadelphia: Fortress and St. Louis: Concordia, 1955–86) [*hereafter* LW], 35:370.

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of good works in the Christian life, Luther could even say in the 1537 Smalcald Articles, “if good works do not follow [faith], then faith is false and not true.”⁹ Melancthon frequently connected faith and good works, as well. In the Augsburg Confession, of which Melancthon was the primary composer, good works was such an important theme that it is featured in two articles, article 6 on the “New Obedience” and article 20 on “Faith and Good Works.” These are the two articles in the Augsburg Confession in which the phrase “faith alone” appears, because the reformers wanted to be clear that as much as they affirmed the importance of good works, justification happens before and apart from human actions and intentions. Good works do not cause justification but are blessed effects of God making us right and justifying us. Melancthon further examined the relationship between justification and good works in article 4 of the Apology (or defense) of the Augsburg Confession.¹⁰ He wrote, for instance, “We openly confess, therefore, that the keeping of the law must begin in us and then increase more and more. And we include both simultaneously, namely, the inner spiritual impulses and the outward good works.”¹¹ Luther and Melancthon had strong, consistent views of how and why Christians do good works. And yet, it may not be going out on a limb to say that many North American Lutherans do not know this side of the tradition very well. Why not? In the case of Luther, I think it is because he spent so much time fighting against the idea that humans have to do at least a little something to be saved. Since Luther so vehemently argued against cooperating with grace or making a choice for Christ, it can be easy to hear him only say “works never justify” and forget what he said about good works pouring forth as a result of God’s free justification and the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives. With respect to Melancthon, his reputation grew so tarnished over the centuries that Lutheran theologians—especially in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—assumed the worst about his teachings on good works and the role of the will in justification. We have therefore frequently missed the lively connections that he, like Luther, made between faith and good works.

9. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) [hereafter BC], 325.3, on “How a Person Is Justified and Concerning Good Works.”

10. See especially BC 140.122–150.188.

11. BC 142.136.

This is where Bugenhagen’s contributions are so valuable today. He unmistakably described the organic relationship between faith and good works in many places, and kept it as a major theme of his works. We see this in the full title of his wonderful 1526 treatise to reform-minded Christians in Hamburg, which reads, “Concerning the Christian Faith and proper good works against the false faith and devised good works. In addition, how one should appoint good preachers so that such love and works are preached.”¹² In Bugenhagen’s teaching, true faith matters because it leads to truly free works of selfless love and service to the neighbor that really come with no strings attached. Reform of the church then means organizing the church around precisely this message of faith, freedom, and service. Luther and Melancthon taught the same thing, but they wrote so much and have been the focus of so much diverse attention over the centuries that it has become easy to miss this. In Bugenhagen, though, this central Reformation theme is unavoidable and clear. Bugenhagen’s writings, therefore, help re-orient how we read Luther, Melancthon, and the Lutheran emphasis on service.

This focus on faith and good works pervades the treatise to Hamburg. After having explained what is wrong with trusting in our own works, Bugenhagen began a section with the heading “True good works before God.” He wrote,

True faith is a trust in God with which we trust only the grace and mercy of God the Father through Jesus Christ our Lord through which we are children of God and God is our dear Father. Therefore, we also begin to love God and God’s word and will and to suffer for the sake of [God’s] will, as the law commands. We also begin to love our neighbor[s] and to serve [them] totally gratuitously as we note that God serves us totally gratuitously. We also gladly forgive our neighbor[s] their sin committed against us, as God forgives us our sin, and when we poor sinners do wrong against God we are sorry and pray as children that our dear Father grant this...

[He continued:]

Only faith makes good trees of us, that is, justified and free from sin. Therefore, we can also bear good fruit, that is, all of our works are good when done in faith. If something is missing in them, faith makes it good again, as it is often said, for a good tree surely also produces a wormy apple sometimes or a bad nut. A storm also sometimes occurs so that all the fruit falls down before it is ripe, or caterpillars spoil the fruit. Would you discard the tree for these reasons? No, the fruit is, indeed, lost, not the goodness. Therefore, the tree does not despair, as if it were absolutely lost, but it hopes that in the future it will bear good fruits at the proper time.¹³

Bugenhagen knew it can be tempting to turn religion into a moral program; that was where his own reforming theology had

12. *Selected Writings*, Vol. 1, 191.

13. *Selected Writings*, Vol. 1, 250–251.

started. But he came to see that a theology that puts our works, piety, and good intentions at the center of Christian life is like focusing on the end of the harvest season and forgetting to tend year 'round to the plants that actually do the work of growing the produce. Bugenhagen's words also affirm the goodness of the plants, even when storms come, when plants are shaken and things do not go as well as we would like for a thousand different reasons. This is the life of the baptized. In faith, works of service and love will appear in due season in those who have been made good trees through the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit.

Bugenhagen excelled at putting this fruitful faith into practice. Again, addressing the critique that emphasizing faith means denying good works, Bugenhagen described the many tangible and practical ways all the baptized serve God and neighbor in daily life. He wrote,

No one should think on the basis of all these words of ours and of Christ that we praise senselessness, foolishness, and arrogance or that we discard noble reason... the art of writing, proper understanding in worldly matters, and similar things. One must surely have sensible, wise intelligent lords, princes, judges, council members, elders, rulers, workers, and similar people in the world. In addition, it is necessary to have learned, experienced, and prudent councilors who recognize from writings and experience what is proper, right, godly, and beneficial in the eyes of God and the people in order to benefit the common good, to rule the ignorant, to oppose the evil, and to protect the godly, Rom. 13[:1-7]. In addition, one must surely devote oneself to the youth in schools with education; with writings; with the Latin, Greek, and Hebrew languages; with temporal arts; and with sacred writings so that one might have people in the cities and territories whom one can use to serve the common good and from whom one might also elect fine, capable preachers, if some received knowledge of the word of God...¹⁴

With passages like these, Bugenhagen described the communal benefits that come when all people are equipped to live out faith through service to neighbors. Gospel faith fosters healthy communities. More than just talking about this, Bugenhagen's "specific genius" (as Carter Lindberg put it)¹⁵ was to connect this evangelical theology with concrete plans and practices, including designating money for ministries such as schools, choirs, medical care, and poor relief. These funding systems were described in Bugenhagen's church orders, which established two community chests: one for poor relief and one for meeting parish expenses.

Where did the money come from? Parish expenses would largely be covered by adapting medieval "benefices" to the new order. With origins in the feudal system, benefices were taxes and rents that were attached to churches and church jobs. Bugenhagen

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was able to point out that with the new Lutheran reforms, parishes would be getting a lot more services for the same amount of money. Instead of priests receiving income regardless of whether they actually ministered or even lived in the area, parish pastors would be paid to serve the local congregation. Other church professionals such as musicians and parish teachers would also be hired with these funds.

Support for the poor chest would come from voluntary donations to physical collection boxes in churches, offerings gathered in worship, and from the kinds of donations people had formerly given for private masses, indulgences, and the like. Also, since Braunschweig had customarily celebrated its patron saint's day with a large festival, the church order directed that the poor chest should receive both the voluntary collection that had usually been taken on that day and the amount of money the city council would have paid to host the festival.¹⁶ In this way, the party fund became poor relief.

Did it work? In a fascinating dissertation, Tim Lorentzen, now of the University of Munich, studied the financial records, receipts, disbursements, and annual reports of cities such as Braunschweig. He found that "justification by faith alone did not lead to empty [community] chests."¹⁷ In short, Bugenhagen and his colleagues found and implemented effective ways to connect Lutheran theology with social action, grass-roots ministries, and realistic funding strategies.

Conclusions

As my talk comes to a close, I would like to connect faith and good works in Bugenhagen's theology by sharing a few of the things I have learned from him, which you will likely encounter when you start reading Bugenhagen's *Selected Writings*. First, Bugenhagen often summarized his theology with the phrase "Christ is our righteousness," a phrase that united Lutheran pairings such as law and gospel, sinner and saint, faith and good works.¹⁸ In terms of preaching the law, for instance, insisting that "Christ is our righteousness" means that we, our good works and good intentions do not have the righteousness that leads to life. On our

14. *Selected Writings*, Vol. 1, 322.

15. Carter Lindberg, *Beyond Charity: Reformation Initiatives for the Poor* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 140.

16. *Selected Writings*, Vol. 2, 1390.

17. Tim Lorentzen, *Johannes Bugenhagen als Reformator der öffentlichen Fürsorge* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 211. "Wie sich aber zeigen wird, hat die Lehre von der Rechtfertigung allein aus Gnade nicht automatisch zu leeren Kassen geführt" (translated by this author).

18. As in *Selected Writings*, Vol. 1, 178.

own, we cannot fix the brokenness that filled the world or our own hearts. Instead, by applying “Christ is our righteousness” to gospel preaching, Christians get to hear, experience, and share that God has given us the righteousness of God freely through faith in Christ. We are made right and righteous through the One, who—to paraphrase Athanasius—became human so that we might become divine. How do we get this holy and life-giving righteousness? Simply by trusting our lives to this Triune God who has loved creation to death and beyond. This central Christian message—“Christ is our righteousness”—grounded Bugenhagen’s biblical interpretation, theological writings, and practical reforms.

Second, Bugenhagen shows us that our institutions really matter. It makes a difference that communities are dedicated to public health, employment, education, and lives of faith lived out in service to others. These commitments require hard work, critical thinking, and financial support. But what else has God given us time, talents, and treasures for, except to use them for the sake of those around us? Bugenhagen’s commitment to the longsuffering and patient task of nurturing strong institutions is a sign of faith in the God who comes hidden in weakness and humility. In faith, our humble efforts in daily work will bear fruit in due season. This commitment to serving the public good through effective local institutions remains an important gift of the Lutheran tradition for today.

Finally, getting to know the Wittenberg Reformation through the eyes of a colleague like Bugenhagen re-humanizes Luther and

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re-introduces us to Melanchthon. Luther was not a demi-god; the people who lived and worked with him day-after-day, year-after-year never mistook him for such, even as they treasured the heavenly gospel message he illuminated in such compelling ways. Similarly, Melanchthon’s contributions in theology, education, and church reform shine forth in new ways when we meet him through a decades-long colleague like Bugenhagen. We discover that stereotypes of his supposed timidity or tendency to compromise simply do not hold up. These were people who shared a deep faith in Christ, could state it and live it out in their own ways, and who worked together from their different strengths and personalities to serve the individuals and communities around them.

In conclusion, Bugenhagen serves as a great example of one who served as he was able, using the gifts he was given, especially through his teacher’s heart and his gifts for community organizing. He remains a valuable companion in our ongoing journey of faith and pilgrimage through life together.