

A new beginning with the word – Johannes Bugenhagen and his Pomeranians

Sermon on Romans 10, 9-17
at the festive service of the Pomeranian Evangelical Church
to mark the 450th anniversary in 2008 of the death of Johannes Bugenhagen
(September 14th 2008 in St. Nicholas' Cathedral, Greifswald)

The grace of our Lord, Jesus Christ, and the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

Dear Friends at this festive service,

The Pomeranian Evangelical Church owes the Reformation to Johannes Bugenhagen. Without him, it is possible that the thrust of innovation and renewal based on reflection on the Word of God might have passed us by. Of course, we cannot be sure. But what we do know is that our church is the church of Jesus Christ in this part of Pomerania which underwent this renewal based on the Word of God. We are as we are to a large extent as a result of the work of Bugenhagen.

That is why today we are commemorating Johannes Bugenhagen, the “coarse Pomeranian” as Philip Melanchthon, the third leading Reformer in Wittenberg, called him once when he felt his arguments were not sufficiently subtle. And the Danish king, Christian III, once referred to Bugenhagen ironically but affectionately as an “old Pomeranian and bacon eater” because Bugenhagen had once insisted on the delivery of the sides of bacon he had been promised. Yes, Johannes Bugenhagen was a Pomeranian – in so natural and self-confident a way that he regularly added “Pomeranian” to his signature and the title of every book – “Johannes Bugenhagen – Pomeranian”. He spent exactly half of the 72 years of his life in Pomerania. He loved Pomerania and introduced the Reformation in Northern Europe.

This friend and colleague of Martin Luther's not only came from Pomerania and studied here in Greifswald; he also wrote¹ the first history of Pomerania entitled “Pomerania”. And it was this same Bugenhagen who rediscovered the Word of God, gave lectures on books of the Bible, gathered people together and thus prepared the Reformation movement in Pomerania which then provided considerable impulses for renewal in Pomerania and beyond.

His encounter with the main Reformation writings of Martin Luther of 1520 awakened in the “Ludimagister Treptovi”, the long-term rector of the Latin School in the small provincial town of Treptow, the desire to study the Word of God again under and with Martin Luther. He made a new start. In February 1521, when he was already 35 years old, he went to Wittenberg and registered as a student again in the university there. The teacher became a pupil again.

In Wittenberg he lived in the house of Philip Melanchthon. Very early on, after only a few months, he was giving lectures again. He was much appreciated by Luther and Melanchthon and enjoyed Luther's protection in particular. 2½ years after his arrival in Wittenberg, Bugenhagen was appointed the pastor of the town. Henceforth, for 3½

¹ cf. H.-G. Leder, Johannes Bugenhagen Pomeranus – Vom Reformator zum Reformer. Studien zur Biographie, ed. V. Gummelt (Greifswalder Theologische Forschung Vol.4) Frankfurt 2002, 414.

decades, his main task was to preach the Word of God. In this way, Bugenhagen entered into a ministry which became his life's work. But he did not just remain the preacher and pastor of the town congregation in Wittenberg. Soon he also became the official visitor and, from 1532 onwards, the general superintendent for the Electorate of Saxony as well. This meant that he had episcopal responsibilities. And Luther referred to him formally as "episcopus ordinatus", "consecrated bishop"².

Indeed, through his ordination activities Bugenhagen became a kind of bishop for all the Lutherans. In Wittenberg alone he performed at least 1470 ordinations of pastors. After being appointed pastor of the town, Bugenhagen saw Wittenberg as his "main base". But he repeatedly left the town and his parish for longer or shorter periods to introduce the Reformation in North German towns and regions and even in Denmark and hence in Norway as well. It is no exaggeration to say that the political and ecclesiastical landscape of Northern Germany and Northern Europe today would look different without Bugenhagen.

But Bugenhagen did not set himself up as a Reformer. He simply took the Word of God, the Bible, seriously. That word changed his life. In obedience to the Word of God he became a minister of the word. The whole world had to hear this Word, the truth. The church and society had to be reorganised on the basis of the Word of God. The life of Johannes Bugenhagen showed that there is a power in the Word of God which can transform human lives and societies.

Bugenhagen's life and work can be described in the words of today's Epistle: "So faith comes from preaching but preaching comes through the Word of Christ." Although Luther refers to preaching in his translation, the literal quotation from Romans 10,17 reads, "So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ."

The word of Christ is expressed by means of human preaching and gives rise to faith, the faith which was important to the Apostle Paul and to the Reformers. In this sense, the life of Johannes Bugenhagen is an excellent illustration of the text for this sermon. Faith in Jesus Christ proved to be the main force in his life. This faith – according to Paul and Bugenhagen – is firstly a personal affair but always linked to the scriptures; secondly, it is faith in Jesus Christ and, thirdly, it is intended to be preached to all people.

1. Faith is personal but always related to the Bible

Johannes Bugenhagen never used religion just to earn a living. At the age of 19, when he became the headmaster of the town school at Treptow on the Rega, the young Bugenhagen was looking for a firm foundation for his life. In this connection, he started reading the Bible and interpreting it. It was unusual for the interpretation of books of the Bible to be included in the curriculum of a Latin School. Apparently as a result of the autodidactic knowledge he acquired, he was also appointed reader in the Belbuck monastery (near Treptow) and gathered around him a group of monks, parish priests and some open-minded citizens who were interested in making a new start and getting away from structures that had become rigid. Up to this point, Bugenhagen had understood the Bible according to the principles of the Roman

² WA. TR 5, 634, 34-36.

Catholic dogmas. So he criticized a number of features of the church of his time. He saw them as distortions of teaching which was true in principle resulting from the erroneous approach of certain individuals.

Then something happened which changed his life totally. At about the end of October 1520, during an evening meal with some of the Treptow clergy in the home of Otto Slutow, the priest of St. Mary's Church in Treptow, Slutow passed around the article Luther had written in Latin "On the Babylonian captivity of the Church". After a cursory glance, Bugenhagen described it as wicked heresy and its author as one of the worst heretics who had even lived. Nevertheless, the book had aroused his curiosity and he took it home to study it seriously. Some days later, he surprised his colleagues with his opinion: "Why should I make you a long speech? The whole world is blind and imprisoned in extreme darkness. This man alone has grasped what is really true."³

This event can be described as the Reformation turning point in the life of Johannes Bugenhagen. In the book, Luther launches a general attack on the dogmas of the Roman Catholic Church. The latter had destroyed the priestly ministry, the office of bishop and all the sacraments by robbing them of their biblical content. Faith was based alone on Jesus Christ himself who comes to meet human beings in the Word and the three sacraments – baptism, confession and the eucharist. This encounter with Jesus Christ is the foundation for the freedom human beings enjoy from other human beings. But Rome had led the church and people into a "Babylonian captivity". Now they had to be liberated from it.

Bugenhagen was fascinated. Luther's exposition led him to recognise suddenly that faith is a totally personal matter. But, at the same time, it implies not only the liberation of the religious individual but simultaneously the establishment of a genuine church communion not based on human power but on common conviction brought about by the Word of God. Now he wanted to get to know this freedom and this communion even better. So he wrote to Martin Luther. Luther answered by return of post and sent him his article which had just been published, "On the freedom of the Christian person". "You wrote that I should write down a rule of life for you. A true Christian does not need moral rules; because the spirit of the faith guides him to all that God wills and Christian love demands. So read this. The Gospel is not believed by everyone. Faith is felt within the heart."⁴

We still know today that this faith in God creates security and provides the orientation we need for living. There is no need for lengthy reflection on what is required; love for our fellow human beings is the natural consequence of faith in Jesus Christ. Anyone who has experienced the love of God, "cannot stop it; it must break through and serve one's neighbours in need whether body or soul with words, teaching, comfort, food, drink, clothing, money, property and, where necessary, also with one's whole being." That is how Bugenhagen formulated it later when writing to "Lady Anna, born duchess of Stettin in Pomerania". Because God loves his human beings, love must also determine the relationships between human beings.

³ Quoted from Davidis Chytraei, *Neue Sachssen Chronica*; quoted here from H.-G. Leder, *Johannes Bugenhagen Pomeranus – Vom Reformator zum Reformatoren*. Studien zur Biographie, ed. V. Gummelt (Greifswalder Theologische Forschungen, Vol.4) Frankfurt 2002, 160.

⁴ *Johannes Bugenhagen Pomeranus. Leben und ausgewählte Schriften*, ed. K.A.T. Vogt, Elberfeld 1867, 30.

An example of how little one can take faith in God for granted today, including the care and attention for our fellow human beings which automatically result from it, was shown by the pictures that went around the world three months ago from a surveillance camera in the waiting room of a hospital in New York. A woman was dying and the whole world watched. Nobody helped. Human beings in the 21st century are so much concerned about themselves that they simply fail to notice what is happening to the people around them. The Christian faith makes us sensitive to the people around us and teaches us to relate to them with respect and love. With Martin Luther's help, Bugenhagen rediscovered this simple, personal, biblical faith and he called on others to be concerned about the fate of their fellow human beings. His proposals for caring for the poor became an example for the later development of the church's diaconal service.

2. Faith is a relationship with Jesus Christ

Faith is not just an inkling of God but rather an expression of a relationship that has been clarified. People find this clarity not because they themselves seek God but because God has revealed God's self in Jesus Christ. Throughout his life, Bugenhagen read the Gospels repeatedly, compared their various stories and attempted to harmonise their sometimes very different accounts. His aim was to obtain as clear as possible a conception of the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. Nowhere was God more clearly seen than in Jesus Christ. For this reason, Bugenhagen devoted himself for decades to perfecting a harmony of the passion and the resurrection so that this core section of the life of Jesus could be presented clearly for every believer to see. He was profoundly moved by what Jesus Christ had done for each individual person. One could perhaps claim that a person who has not yet sensed the shattering feeling of what Jesus Christ has done for each one of us has also not yet reached the depths of a personal faith. Such a person has not yet – as Martin Luther put it – “felt” the faith “in their heart”.

But nobody should say that it is no longer possible for modern people to experience horror about Jesus' dying for us. The actor, Ben Becker, who is not considered to be particularly religious, is touring the country at the moment with a performance of biblical stories lasting several hours. He has been moved to tears several times when reading the account of the crucifixion. An impertinent journalist asked him, “Are your tears an integral part of the show?” And Becker replied, “It is really overwhelming when you know that this man was nailed to that lousy cross for each one of us. When I read that I am reminded of the atrocities happening in the world today.” For this reason, Christ had become his “friend”⁵.

What the actor Ben Becker has experienced is what Bugenhagen wanted to pass on through the interpretation of the Gospels: the death of Jesus Christ is not just a death sentence like those which have unfortunately been carried out repeatedly in the course of world history but rather an event that took place “for us”. Through the death of Jesus Christ and his resurrection, God shows his unconditional love for us human beings. This brings us to the third point.

⁵ Die Welt, 19.7.2008.

3. The love of God must be proclaimed to everyone

Anyone today who knows Johannes Bugenhagen is probably aware of his work on church order. He introduced the Reformation in numerous free imperial cities (Brunswick, Hamburg, Lübeck and Hildesheim) and territories (Pomerania, Schleswig and Holstein, Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel) and even in Scandinavia (Denmark and Norway). We shall probably be hearing more in a short while about Bugenhagen's influence which gave the church new structures and about the principles on which they were based. This establishment of new church structures and the ordering of the ministry within them was, however, not an end in itself. For Bugenhagen it was a consequence of the sheer necessity of preaching the faith to all people.

“But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent?” (Rom. 10,14 f). Bugenhagen teaches us that all shaping and changing of church structures has only one purpose: to promote the preaching of the Gospel. So therefore evangelists are needed. “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news (evangelists)!” (Rom. 10,15).

In an interpretation of the first letter to the Corinthians, Chapter 12, Bugenhagen later stated, “Evangelists are not only, as we assume, the authors of the four Gospels, although the name belongs to them in a special way. Paul in his writings calls people evangelists who do not work in only one place like the shepherds, *pastores*, or are sent out like the apostles into the whole world, but who are sent to specific places, who preach the Gospel and are empowered by the gift of the Spirit to defend the article about justification and forgiveness of sins against Satan and false apostles, against those who rely on works and philosophers or those wise in reason. They preach the Gospel only in the places where they have been sent, either by God with confirmation by miracles, as happened in the Early Church, or by the apostles or by the church or apostolic men who have the authority to do so, as we can see in the Apostolic Church... Such evangelists, whether they are sent to various places and do their work by speaking or remain in the same place and work through their writings, are needed by the church if it wishes to prevent philosophical, human fantasies from being held finally for the Gospel.⁶”

When Bugenhagen himself repeatedly interrupted his pastoral and episcopal work in Wittenberg and was called to various places and countries, he himself understood these activities as the ministry of this kind of evangelist. And he did not limit himself to merely giving orders, organising, administering and structuring; wherever he was called to help make space for the Gospel, he started preaching and teaching. Many people today find it hard to grasp what church leadership means in a genuinely Lutheran sense. Church leadership is always primarily preaching the Gospel and only as a consequence also decision making, resolving, organising and managing. Church leadership takes place in preaching the Gospel and celebrating worship. That is where the heart of the church beats. And then leadership in the narrower sense is derived from it. The one must not be separated from the other.

⁶ Quoted from: Johannes Bugenhagen Pomeranus. *Leben und ausgewählte Schriften*, ed. K.A.T. Vogt, Elberfeld 1867, 268 f.

Under the conditions of his time, Bugenhagen did this in agreement with, indeed normally at the request of, the relevant council of the town or the ruling prince. That, of course, was the appropriate context in the 16th century. Preaching the Gospel to all people is the fundamental task of the church at all times. And so, if we wish to be an Evangelical Lutheran Church as understood by Martin Luther and Johannes Bugenhagen, the target group for our preaching must be all the people on the territory of our church.

At a time when, as in this region, only 23% of the population have been attracted by the Christian faith and belong to a church, that is a great challenge. For that reason, our Pomeranian Evangelical Church resolved in a basic statement that we want “to enable as many people as possible to come into contact (anew) with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.” We set ourselves the concrete task of “stabilising the proportion of the population as a whole who are members of the Pomeranian Evangelical Church and increasing the proportion in the medium term so as to become a growing church in this sense... This particularly includes all efforts to reach people from different social strata and settings with different levels of education and different life histories who would like to contribute to our congregations and our church with their questions and fears, their hopes and doubts but who, for various different reasons, have thus far found very little possibility to participate and contribute.⁷” Only when we as the Pomeranian Church set our sights on the people to whom we are sent and on the Gospel simultaneously shall we do justice to the inheritance of Johannes Bugenhagen.

It can be helpful for our work if a large proportion of the churches in Northern Germany in which Bugenhagen introduced the Reformation unite in the future to form one regional church. While Bugenhagen had to work separately in Hamburg and Lübeck, Schleswig and Holstein and Pomerania for the Reformation to be accepted, it will probably soon be the case that these churches, all of which have a common North German history, come together in one structure.

But, however that may be, we owe it to our Reformer, Johannes Bugenhagen the Pomeranian, that he renewed the church in the region of Pomerania – and far beyond – and saved it from a number of errors by preaching the Word of God. He reestablished faith as the first priority in the church. This faith is from start to finish faith in Jesus Christ. We are willing to carry out our task and proclaim Christ as strongly as we can to all the people in our region so that love remains and hope can grow.

Amen

And the peace of God which surpasses all our understanding keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen

⁷ Leben in Gottes Gegenwart. Perspektiven für die Pommersche Evangelische Kirche. Ergebnisse des Leitbildprozesses von 2002 bis 2005, ed. Pommersche Evangelische Kirche, Greifswald 2006, 36.