

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

Sermon on Romans 10, 9-17  
at the English church service, the Day of John the Baptist  
(June 24<sup>th</sup> 2018 in St. Johns' Church, 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, Brothers and Sisters,

Do you know, why the goal of Toni Kroos yesterday evening was so important for the people of Greifswald? Because Toni Kroos is a son of this city and because the Pomeranian People, that means the people of this region, where we are living, have a broken identity. In the last century they lost part of their history and most of their people. Once, before the second World War, Pomerania was a great province of Germany. Now, it is nearly forgotten. Some in Germany think: Is there anymore an area called Pomerania in our country? Perhaps you realized the tough discussion about the name of the university of Greifswald in the last two years. Should the university be called after Ernst Moritz Arndt, a great scholar of the Pomeranian island of Rügen or not. Arndt and Kroos are guys from this area. So people think: We are somebody. We are not forgotten.

Another great guy from Pomerania was Johannes Bugenhagen. Today is his birthday. He was born in the year 1485, 533 years ago. He is one of the big four of the memorial at the Rubenow place. This church is linked very close to Johannes Bugenhagen, because it is a Johanneskirche, Johns' Church. The house of the congregation at the side of the church is called: Bugenhagenhaus. And the street is called "Bugenhagenstraße". Bugenhagen is very important for Pomerania. Pomerania owes the Reformation in the sixteen century to Johannes Bugenhagen. Without him, the reformation might have passed us by. We are as we are as a result of the work of Bugenhagen.

That is the reason why I decided to introduce to you Johannes Bugenhagen, the "coarse Pomeranian" as Philip Melancthon, the third leading Reformer in Wittenberg, called him once. And the Danish king, Christian III, once referred to Bugenhagen 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 – so self-confident that he regularly added "Pomeranian" to his signature– "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 wrote<sup>1</sup> 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.

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

He was for a long time the head of the Latin School in the small town of Treptow. This city belongs today to Poland. In the year 1520 he read the main Reformation writings of Martin Luther. This changed his life completely. 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. And he continued to be the pastor in Wittenberg for 35 years. 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 was the bishop of the reformation<sup>2</sup>.

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. (To compare: In my 17 years as bishop I ordained about 70 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.

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 translation 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.

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<sup>2</sup> WA. TR 5, 634, 34-36.

## 1. Faith is personal but always related to the Bible

When Johannes Bugenhagen was the headmaster of the town school at Treptow on the Rega, 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."<sup>3</sup>

This event can be described as the Reformation turning point in the life of Johannes Bugenhagen. 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 believer but simultaneously the establishment of a new communion. 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."<sup>4</sup>

## 2. Faith is a relationship with Jesus Christ

Nowhere was God more clearly seen than in Jesus Christ. 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". 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.

## 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 – which was including in that time South Sweden and Norway). This establishment of new church structures and the ordering of the ministry within them was, however, not an

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

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

end in itself. For Bugenhagen it was founded in the 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 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).

At a time when, as in this region, only 20% 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.”

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