

Johannes Bugenhagen, Public Theologian

Colleagues,

Too few of us, I fear, know much about Reformation history beyond snippets of Luther's biography and the vague impressions of Melanchthon we may or may not have garnered while working through the Augsburg Confession and its Apology at some point too long ago. Lost in the background, meanwhile, are other giants of the day whose work, both academic and ecclesiastical, was of the essence in establishing the distinction between Law and Gospel as the theological gift of gifts that keeps on giving 500 years after Luther tumbled to it.

Today we meet one of those background giants, if ever so briefly. Making the introduction is the Rev. Dr. Martin Lohrmann, pastor of Christ Ascension Lutheran Church in Philadelphia. A 2004 graduate of Wartburg Theological Seminary, Pr. Lohrmann pursued further studies at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia where he earned a PhD under Timothy Wengert. His work on Johannes Bugenhagen, the pastor and theologian who both married Luther and preached at his funeral, has just been published by Lutheran University Press under the title "Bugenhagen's Jonah: Biblical Interpretation as Public Theology." You can get it directly from the publisher (www.lutheranupress.org/Books/Bugenhagens_Jonah) or, as ever, from amazon.com. (Tough luck, you Barnes & Noble fans. You won't find it there.) Herewith a teaser, penned by Martin, to whet your appetite.

By the way, Martin was a member of the youth contingent (= anybody under 50 years old) at the Crossings Conference in January. We're delighted indeed to have his voice included in

the ongoing conversation, all the more as it advances our Easter theme of meeting up with Christ in Galilee (see [ThTheol #722](#)). Isn't that what Bugenhagen was up to in 16th century Wittenberg? It's for sure what Martin is doing in 21st century Philadelphia. That his labors might be blessed, we pray: "Come, Holy Spirit."

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

"Bugenhagen's Jonah: Biblical Interpretation as Public Theology"

Johannes Bugenhagen (1485-1558) was the head pastor in Wittenberg during the early decades of the Reformation. He worked closely with Luther and Melanchthon to reform church and society and was also a professor at the town's university.

After Luther died in 1546, Lutherans in Germany lost a war to the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V. Charles was a devout Roman Catholic who wanted to bring the German Protestants back into the Roman fold. The future of the Reformation was very much in peril.

During this time, Bugenhagen lectured on the prophet Jonah. Those lectures became his 1550 Jonah Commentary (his last major work). Why did he choose Jonah? Because to troubled communities and preachers, Jonah proclaims the theology of the cross and the hidden wisdom of God. As Bugenhagen wrote in the university records in the fall of 1547, "Today, at the third hour, I will begin to lecture on the prophet Jonah, in which we learn what it says in Psalm 51: 'For behold, you love the truth, which is hidden, and you reveal your hidden wisdom to me.' May Christ be among us in his Spirit."

Bugenhagen found a good ally for teaching and preaching in this prophet. Jonah himself lived under the cross and the just condemnation of death, which Bugenhagen could also say of himself and his fellow Lutherans. Nevertheless, God saved the prophet in order to preach faith and salvation to others. Bugenhagen prayed for the same for his church. He wrote,

“By fleeing, Jonah sinned most gravely against God, who sent him to the Gentiles. And later he was angry and murmured against God, that he had spared Nineveh. Paul had been a blasphemer and persecutor of God’s church; Peter denied Christ; the apostles fought about primacy. Christ censured them, for in danger on the sea they did not invoke God and did not trust in God, to which Christ said, ‘Where now is your faith?’ Therefore God protects his chosen and beloved ones even in sin, so that they might not perish in eternity, even in the middle of the sea, in death and hell (as is often sung in the Psalms), even against the sentence of divine law, as you see in the people of Nineveh, etc.”

From the brief biblical book of Jonah, Bugenhagen expanded his commentary into a massive (400-page) statement about repentance and faith. Historically, he was addressing the Council of Trent, the Augsburg Interim, and—eventually—the accusations of other Lutherans who found fault with the Wittenberg theologians in those years. But he was also teaching the positive effects of Evangelical Lutheran teaching. His entire career had been marked by attention to the right relationship between faith and good works, as expressed in the Augsburg Confession’s articles 6 & 20. Because of this focus, he taught that “what a thing is” (theology and biblical interpretation) always relates to “what a thing does” (good works of love and service that come from faith). A good tree bears good fruits. Christian faith changes hearts, minds and—in Nineveh’s case—entire communities, even

when grace is hidden in divine and human wrath in this world. Expressing this conviction, Bugenhagen summed up his teaching: "All history is in the image of the passion and resurrection of Christ."

My research of Bugenhagen examines how his biblical interpretation informed both his theology and his leadership of the church in Wittenberg during a time of serious uncertainty. It explores his relationships with Luther and Melanchthon, his ability to express their shared theology with clarity, and his ability to apply that faith in practical ways.

I conclude with another one of Bugenhagen's statements about the connection between Jonah's experience, Christ's cross, and God's power to save:

"Christ asked the Father that death might pass from him [Mt. 26:39] and 'he was heard because of his reverence' [Heb. 5:7]. But how was he heard? With ridicule before the world, as they cried out under the cross, 'If you are the son of God, come down now off the cross,' etc. [Mt. 27:42]. God cast him to death and hell and then exalted him, setting him at his right hand, etc. 'This was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes' [Ps. 118:23], a verse that spoke of the resurrection. It is right that Christ suffered and in this way entered into his glory." Thus, Jonah pitifully expected to be swallowed, which is horrifying. For not only was he swallowed by the sea or even by the whale, spending three days and three nights there, but even through death and hell he was protected by God for life. He was stuck inside of death, neither able to die nor to know liberation. This is what is sung in Psalm 4:3: 'The Lord has made his holy ones wonderful; the Lord will hear me when I cry to him'...

"These promises are ours today in this oppressed church. When

we invoke the name of the Lord and are hopeful, God wonderfully liberates and glorifies his holy ones."

Martin Lohrmann
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Post-scripts:

1. On Famous Last Words—Our recent Holy Week offering about Easter preaching ([ThTheol #221](#)) included a recollection of Jaroslav Pelikan's deathbed confession in 2007 of the Christian's Easter-grounded faith. It was such a breathtaking gem of pithy, can't-be-said-better assertion that it got widely reported at the time. Still, there was something in our replay of it that left Ed Schroeder scratching his head a little. So he promptly called some original sources (who doesn't Ed know, thanks be to God) and got back to us with the following:

"The authentic text [of Pelikan's confession] is 'If Christ was NOT raised, nothing matters. SINCE Christ IS now raised, nothing ELSE matters.' It's a classic law-grammar, Gospel-grammar distinction (ala Luther/Elert). 'IF..., then...' vs. 'SINCE..., therefore...', all with a quintessential Pelikanian rhetorical twist."

Did we like that? We did, so much so that we promptly posted it on Facebook. That led Crossings fan Rich Jungkuntz to start scratching his head a bit in northern Thailand where he lives these days. Rich promptly went to the internet, did some poking around of his own, and got back to us with the observation that there are several variants of Pelikan's saying floating around out there,

none of which exactly match what Ed reported. And wouldn't you know, one of those variants shows up in Ed's own Thursday Theology essay of 30 August 2007 ([#481](#)). OK, so apart from the intriguing glimpse this affords into the way that oral history works, do we much care about the variants, Ed's included? Not really. Fact is, we like the ring of the latest recension so well that in true post-modern style we'll happily take it as the final word on the final words, thanking Ed for nailing it down; to which we also and merrily add the post-final words of essential Easter doxology: "He is risen indeed. Alleluia!"

2. On Your Own Less Famous though Nonetheless Important Words—We could use them. Back in November, when we launched this adventure of Thursday Theology post-Ed, we tossed out an invitation to those who may read it to pitch in with their contributions. We meant it then. We mean it even more today. We're still guessing that lots of you have things to say against the backdrop of the Law/Gospel distinction that the rest of us would be glad to read and learn from. So we invite you yet again to send us your stuff. We'd love to read it ourselves and to weigh it for publication. We could use the help, to be frank. So please, Be Ye Not Bashful. Dig up that best sermon, cut loose with the burgeoning thought, and hit the send button. The addresses to use are cabraunATaolDOTcom or jburceATattDOTnet. Thanks!

The Divorce of Sex and Marriage: Sain Sex, a new book by Robert Bertram, is now available for a \$10 donation to Crossings. Please include \$3 for shipping and handling, and send your request to clessmannATcharterDOTnet.

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