



A BIBLE STUDY ON JOHANNES BUGENHAGEN

*Luther's Friend and Pastor who made
Reformation Theology Practical for the Churches*

“CHRIST JESUS LAY IN DEATH’S STRONG BANDS”

(TLH 195; LW 123; LSB 458)

(Acts 2:24; 1 Cor. 15:54–57; 1 Cor. 5:7b; Tim. 1:10)

“If you know Christ well, it is enough, though you know nothing else; if you know not Christ, what else you learn does not matter.” — Johannes Bugenhagen

Among the professors of theology at the University of Wittenberg, Martin Luther reported to his prince that he appreciated Melancthon and Karlstadt in the classroom, but Bugenhagen was simply irreplaceable. When the position of pastor of the city church became available, Luther was so confident in the pastoral skills of this Pomeranian that he announced to the congregation that Bugenhagen would be their new pastor — even before Bugenhagen had made any final decision to accept the call.

Johannes was unique among the Lutheran reformers; he was both Luther’s close friend and, beginning in 1523, Luther’s pastor. He conducted the marriage ceremony for Martin and Katie and preached at Martin’s funeral service. He continued his faithful care of Katie and the children after Martin’s death.

Bugenhagen was one of the first three Reformation theologians to earn a doctorate in theology in 1533; in 1539 he was called as superintendent of the Lutheran Church in Saxony.

A talented churchman, Bugenhagen devoted much of his energy to translating the truths re-discovered by Luther into practical church policy and practice. Bugenhagen did not spend his entire career in the classroom; much of his focus was with the local congregations in Wittenberg and other congregation who struggled to understand what Luther and the Reformation meant for their daily parish life. Bugenhagen’s ability to eliminate congregational elements contrary to the clear Word of God — while allowing room for things not expressly commanded or forbidden — did much to ground needed reforms in local soil.

STANZA ONE

Christ Jesus lay in death’s strong bands / For our offenses given; / But now at God’s right hand He stands / And brings us life from heaven. / Therefore let us joyful be /

And sing to God right thankfully / Loud songs of alleluia! Alleluia!

Hymnologists have commented that among the hymns of Martin Luther, “Christ Jesus Lay in Death’s Strong Bands” is second only to “A Mighty Fortress” in its faithful presentation of the redemption by Christ through His life, death and resurrection for a helpless humanity. Bugenhagen’s extensive work with local congregations confirmed his faithfulness to the Word of God and the faithful reflection of the resurrected Christ in the Church Year and orders of service.

1. From the start, Luther and Bugenhagen proclaimed the life, death and resurrection of Christ in the place of a weak and helplessly-fallen-into-sin humanity. Jesus took upon Himself the enormity of the world’s sin, that He might make once-and-for-all satisfaction for it. Central to the Reformation teaching of Christ was the faithful reflection of what the Scriptures reveal: Jesus came to make full atonement for all sin. His judgment on the cross, His death, His resurrection and ascension into heaven was in our place. This is most clear on the highest festival of the Church Year: the Festival of the Resurrection of Our Lord — Easter. Why is it that Easter and not Christmas Day has been the high point of the Church Year for the last two thousand years?

2. Luther and Bugenhagen did not throw away the Church Year, unlike the radical reformers who mistakenly believed that the Church Year was a non-Christian invention of the Roman Catholic Church. What are the salutary benefits of Christian congregations ordering their faith and life around the Church Year? Is it the intent of the Church Year to put the spotlight on the life of the organized church or the life of Christ?

STANZA TWO

No son of man could conquer death, / Such ruin sin had wrought us. / No innocence was found on earth, / And therefore death has brought us / Into bondage from of old / And ever grew more strong and bold / And held us as its captive. Alleluia!

Bugenhagen and Luther cast aside the belief that the chaste life of a monk could earn salvation. Bugenhagen was among the first of the Lutheran reformers to be convinced by the Bible that marriage was a good gift of God and not to be condemned by the Christian Church or its leaders. Our only righteousness is the righteousness declared over us at our Baptism.

3. Why is it so important to understand that our bondage into sin is not only through our sinful behavior, but on account of our sinful nature? Why is death the consequence for all outside of Christ, despite an individual's outward behavior under the Ten Commandments?

4. All Christians, including Luther and Bugenhagen, drag their old, sinful nature around with them throughout their life. Luther's old nature still got him into trouble (for example, his pronouncement against the Jews for not receiving the Gospel of Christ). But for Luther, Bugenhagen and each of us, in Christ our freedom from sin is assured. Why are the words of Christ in John 8:31–36 the traditional Gospel reading for the Festival of the Reformation? How are these truths in John 8 reflected in this second stanza?

STANZA THREE

Christ Jesus, God's own Son, came down, / His people to deliver; / Destroying sin, He took the crown / From death's pale brow forever: / Stripped of pow'r, no more it reigns; / An empty form alone remains; / Its sting is lost forever. Alleluia!

Because of his work of bringing the Gospel into the faith and life of so many communities in Germany and Scandinavia (Hildensheim, Hamburg, Lübeck, Pomerania, East Frisia, Schleswig-Holstein, Braunschweig, Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel, Denmark–Norway), Bugenhagen was later referred to in Reformation histories as “the Second Apostle of the North.” By God's grace he sowed much Gospel seed not only in Wittenberg but around Europe as well.

5. The sacrifice of Isaac (GEN. 22) foreshadows the eternal deliverance accomplished by Jesus and His conquering of sin and its effects upon the cross. For those who receive Christ's perfect sacrifice by faith, death can never have the final word. “An empty form alone remains; its sting is lost forever.” Review St. Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 15. Why is this entire chapter a source of unending comfort for those who grieve for those who have died in the faith?

6. “So much sin and death!” How would you defend the themes Martin Luther uses in this hymn (and the language also used by Bugenhagen in his many sermons) against those who wish that Easter hymns talk only about spring flowers and rainbows? See the description of the Lamb in Rev. 5:6.

STANZA FOUR

It was a strange and dreadful strife / When life and death contended; / The victory remained with life, / The reign of death was ended. / Holy Scripture plainly saith / That death is swallowed up by death, / Its sting is lost forever. Alleluia!

Luther and Bugenhagen never tired of pointing the Christian, and the Christian Church, to the one clear foundation of our faith: Christ and His Word of promise. “Scripture plainly saith.” Luther proclaimed the clarity of Holy Scripture his entire life — especially when it came to Jesus as our substitutionary sacrifice.

7. In the *Smalcald Articles* (3:12), Luther wrote: “Thank God, today, a seven-year-old child knows what the Church is, namely, the holy believers and lambs who hear the voice of their Shepherd.” The Lutheran Reformation taught that saving faith is present even in the youngest of believers. How does this differ from other Protestant Christians who add “the age of accountability” to the clear teaching of Scripture?

8. To the unbelieving world, Christ's death was a shameful, pitiful failure. But to all who believe, the cross of Christ is a life-giving tree and a proclamation of God's victory for a condemned, rebellious race. How is the crucifix the clearest presentation of God's Law? How is the cross of Christ, at the same time, the clearest presentation of God's grace and mercy?

STANZA FIVE

Here our true Paschal Lamb we see, / Whom God so freely gave us; / He died on the accursèd tree— / So strong His love—to save us. / See, His blood now marks our door; / Faith points to it; death passes o'er, / And Satan cannot harm us. Alleluia!

Following John the Baptist, Luther and Bugenhagen centered their preaching, teaching and pastoral care on “the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world.” Again, the substitutionary sacrifice of Christ on the cross is foreshadowed in the lamb sacrificed at the Passover.

9. This faithful tradition is continued today in preaching, teaching, acts of mercy, and liturgical music and the arts. How is the image of Jesus as the Lamb of God used in the paraments, banners and artwork of the congregation you attend?

10. Luther writes, “He died on the accursed tree — / So strong His love — to save us.” Why is it important to remember — even on Easter — that the proclamation “He is risen!” is shorthand for “He is risen from the dead!”? How should we respond to the demand made by some that “We should not see any depiction of Christ on the cross during the Easter season”?

STANZA SIX

*So let us keep the festival / To which the Lord invites us; /
Christ is Himself the joy of all, / The sun that warms and
lights us. / Now His grace to us imparts / Eternal sunshine
to our hearts; / The night of sin is ended. Alleluia!*

The feast of Easter is an invitation to receive the resurrected-from-the-dead Christ in faith. Easter is much more than a simple acknowledgment that Jesus actually rose from the dead. God-given trust believes that, like His life, suffering and death, Jesus' resurrection was "in my stead" — "for me." Review the explanation of the Second Article of the Creed in Luther's Small Catechism. Note the use of the word "my" in the explanation.

11. "Keeping" the festival of Our Lord's Resurrection means to honor and treasure it under the 3rd Commandment. How does the unbelieving world fail to properly honor and treasure Easter? Why is it crucial to always remember it is the Lord's Day and not our day? Why do we say that every Sunday is a little Easter?

12. How is this phrase "the night of sin has ended" to be properly understood? How does an Easter Vigil service emphasize this night/day contrast for the believer in Christ and His death and resurrection?

STANZA SEVEN

*Then let us feast this Easter Day / On Christ, the bread of
heaven; / The Word of grace has purged away / The old
and evil leaven. / Christ alone our souls will feed; / He is our
meat and drink indeed; / Faith lives upon no other! Alleluia!*

This final stanza draws from Jesus' words to His followers in John 6:26–58. With these words, Jesus points to Himself as the true Manna from heaven.

13. Compare John 6:35 with John 1:29, 26. What event in salvation history strongly links these titles together? How does John the Evangelist see Jesus' substitutionary sacrifice as the fulfillment of Exodus 16? What is the great difference between the manna the children of Israel received and the true Bread of Heaven? (See **Ex. 16:19–21**.) To what does the phrase "the old and evil leaven" refer? (See **MATT. 16:6**.)

14. Jesus is our eternal life come in human flesh. Like the believers who went before us, we receive Christ, the Bread of Heaven, in faith. What does Martin Luther mean in this final stanza, "Christ alone our souls will feed; / He is our meat and drink indeed; Faith lives upon no other!"?

