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# John Bugenhagen and the *Comma Johanneum*

Franz Posset

## 1. The Setting (Wittenberg in 1527)

John Bugenhagen, almost two years younger than Luther, was the professor's pastor and student at the same time. As pastor at Wittenberg he heard Luther's confession when the reformer thought he would die in the summer of 1527—ten years after the publication of the ninety-five theses on indulgences and during the worst months of Luther's mid-life crisis.<sup>1</sup> Luther offered a course on John's First Epistle later in the summer and the autumn of 1527<sup>2</sup> in which Bugenhagen most likely participated.

While the majority of the professors and students had left Wittenberg at that time because of the pestilence, and the University officially had moved to Jena for the time being, Luther stayed and so did Bugenhagen. Luther mentioned in a letter that he himself and the pastor Bugenhagen together with his two chaplains, Georg Rörer and Johannes Mantel, had remained in town,<sup>3</sup> obviously because Luther was convinced that for certain people, at least, it is not allowed to flee from death.<sup>4</sup> Pastors belong to this group of people—a conviction he mentioned in his lecture on 1 John of September 30, 1527. According to the printed version of Luther's commentary on 1 John (published by Neumann in 1708), he is reported to have declared: "There are also other occasions, as for example, when there is a pestilence. Then, preachers should remain in order that they may lay down their lives for the brethren."<sup>5</sup> This was exactly the situation at Wittenberg in 1527. It appears to be a correct assumption that the preacher Bugenhagen was an obedient student of Luther's teaching in this regard, for he stayed in Wittenberg during the plague. So did the two previously mentioned chaplains. One of them, Rörer, was Luther's "graduate student" in the course of 1 John. Rörer's notes on Luther's lectures on 1 John are the most important source for our investigation on the reformer's position on the *Comma Johanneum*. Whether Bugenhagen also was a course participant can only indirectly be determined from another one of Luther's letters, in which Luther mentioned that Bugenhagen's and Rörer's families had moved in with him at the former Augustinian monastery where Luther had his permanent home even after his marriage. Luther wrote, furthermore, that at that time his home looked more like a hospital; as Rörer's wife lay dying there, Bugenhagen suffered from constipation and had to take a purgative, Luther's baby John was teething, and his wife Kate was expecting their second child soon.<sup>6</sup> Even if Bugenhagen

was not directly a course participant and thus would not have directly learned Luther's position on 1 John, it is most likely that he heard about it when living under the same roof with the Luthers and the Rörers. In order to understand Bugenhagen's position on 1 John 5:7, it must be considered in relationship to Luther's position, about which he lectured in his home.

## 2. Luther's Lecture on the *Comma Johanneum*

There are several sources which reveal the professor's opinion about 1 John 5:7. There is the *Table Talk*<sup>7</sup> and three students' lecture notes.<sup>8</sup> The statement in Luther's *Table Talk* (No. 7101) does not appear to have originated in the setting of the lectures on 1 John in 1527, but rather stemmed from a situation when Luther dealt with his German translation of the New Testament:

"There are three who give testimony," etc. (1 John 5). Why is this locus not translated in the German translation? He responded: I and others believe that it is sort of added, that it is added by some ignoramus. We do not want, however, to translate it because of the word "testimony," because in heaven there will be no need for a testimony . . . as it is written: "we will see God face to face." There, the Trinity will declare Himself.<sup>9</sup>

Never did Luther use 1 John 5:7 as proof for the doctrine of the Trinity.<sup>10</sup> Who is the "ignoramus" who inserted verse 7 into the text? Luther's answer to this question is preserved in lecture notes. One set of these is labeled as scholia,<sup>11</sup> the other two, as student lecture notes, one set written by Rörer and the other attributed to Probst.

Like the *Table Talk*, the scholia (=S) includes a reference to 1 Corinthians 13, where Paul speaks of the fact that what is imperfect will be "evacuated," S refers to verse 10 while the *Table Talk* quotes verse 12. Both S and the *Table Talk* show that Luther argued with the word "testimony," saying that 1 John 5:7 is superfluous because in heaven one does not need any testimony or faith, because one will see God as He is (1 John 3:2). We may conclude that both sources, S and the *Table Talk*, reveal virtually the same position of Luther on the *Comma Johanneum*. Source-critically speaking, however, the student lecture notes (R and P) are more precise than a report on a remark at table or the source S, which are both more fragmentary in character than the two students' notes.

What did Luther teach in his course on 1 John on 30 October 1527, when he came to speak on 5:7? P (and thus Neumann's printed version of 1708, upon which the American Edition of Luther's works

is based) reads as follows: “. . .but this verse seems to have been inserted by the Catholics because of the Arians, yet not aptly.”<sup>12</sup> The “ignoramus” of the *Table Talk* is identified by Luther (according to P) as “Catholics” opposed to Arius. Since P is available only in the printed version of the eighteenth century, one could take this explanation as a redactor’s interpolation. Such contamination is possible considering the editorial work that went into the printed version of which the original is lost. Furthermore, P has no reference to 1 Corinthians 13. What P reports Luther to have said is that John did not speak *passim* (without discernment) about witnesses in heaven but on earth.<sup>13</sup> In the light of this evidence one is dependent upon the chaplain Rörer (R), the “graduate student” in Luther’s course on 1 John. R reads as follows:

“For there are three.” This locus the Greek codices do not have. It seems that it was inserted ineptly by the eagerness of ancient theologians against Arius, if one looks at the analogy of faith. Where God is seen, there is no need for a testimony, but here it is needed, here we have it in the word, and we do not want to have it any other way, since there is no testimony in heaven and no faith, which are of this life. Therefore, we leave out this text. Also the subsequent text ridicules this verse. And I can make fun of it easily because there is no more inept locus for the Trinity.<sup>14</sup>

This is the most precise stenogram of Luther’s lecture on the *Comma Johanneum*. Essentially, Luther said the same as in the *Table Talk* and in S and P. According to R, Luther identified the “ignoramus” with “ancient theologians” opposed to the Arians, which is the same group as the “Catholics” of P. Thus Luther in the classroom must have made reference to these “Catholics” as “ancient theologians.” P and R complement each other, and we may be rather certain about Luther’s position on 1 John 5:7.

The idea that verse 7 is inserted by anti-Arians was expressed in Erasmus’ annotations to the New Testament,<sup>15</sup> where Luther probably read it first since he used Erasmus’ edition of the Greek-Latin New Testament. Beyond the information in the *Table Talk*, in S and in P, R mentions Luther considering verse 7 inept because of its contextual incongruity (*et sequens textus eludit hunc locum*) Thus, Luther continued in his lecture, “I can make easily fun of it, because there is no more inept locus for the Trinity.”

Summarizing Luther’s position on the *Comma*, we must point out that Luther presupposed the trinitarian faith, but he does not use 1 John 5:7 as a proof-text for this doctrine. He considered verse 7 as

superfluous because of its friction with the immediate context and because, after all, the Greek codices do not include it. In the lecture on 1 John 5:7 he went a step further than in the *Table Talk*, where only the reference to the self-declaration of the Trinity and to "some ignoramus" is made. In the lecture the professor identified the "ignoramus" as ancient Catholic theologians whose efforts may be ridiculed. Luther did not see any need for verse 7 and, therefore, excluded it from the New Testament as Erasmus had done in his first editions of his Greek-Latin New Testament. Luther and Erasmus repeated Jerome's remark that the verse was directed against the Arians. Luther did not need this verse to defend the orthodox position of the trinitarian faith.

### 3. Bugenhagen's Position

It is in Bugenhagen's exposition of the prophet Jonah, edited several years after Luther's death, in which we find the pastor's position on the *Comma Johanneum*.<sup>16</sup> He conjured all printers and learned men to delete 1 John 5:7 for the sake of the truth and the honor of God and thus to give back to the Greek text its original purity. The reason is that this verse conflicts with its context and the matter with which John deals here.<sup>17</sup> This is exactly the position of Erasmus and Luther, who argued from the incongruity of verse 7 with its context. It is a literary-theological argumentation. More clearly than Luther Bugenhagen was concerned with the purity of the Greek original.

Both were equally concerned with the doctrine of God, which is not threatened by the exclusion of verse 7. Yet Bugenhagen opted for the deletion of the text for the sake of the honor of God and the truth, while Luther had been content with ridiculing the ancient theologians who thought they could refute the Arians by adding verse 7 to the text. Bugenhagen dwelt more on the theological argumentation and saw verse 7 in reality as the product of the Arians themselves! It is they who introduced it into the epistle!<sup>18</sup> Here, Bugenhagen went beyond any previous argumentation. Bugenhagen elaborated further on the ineptitude of the verse and declared it an "Arian blasphemy." Bugenhagen argued that if Father, Logos, and Holy Spirit were one as Spirit, water, and blood are one, then the Arians are the winners; for this verse states (in the eyes of Bugenhagen) only a unity of consensus, not a unity of essence.<sup>19</sup>

Bugenhagen's position represents an elaboration of Erasmus' initial position on the *Comma*, which was repeated and maintained by Luther throughout his life. When Erasmus changed his mind in this

regard, Luther and Bugenhagen did not follow the humanist scholar, but maintained their theologically grounded position. But strangely, Bugenhagen did not refer to Luther in this regard. A possible explanation could be that Luther's commentary on 1 John was never published during Luther's or Bugenhagen's lifetime, and it seems that Bugenhagen did not have his chaplain Rörer's notes available. All that Bugenhagen had at hand in printed form was Erasmus' editions of the New Testament and Luther's German version based upon the initial Erasmusian position of deleting verse 7. Luther's lectures on 1 John (1527) had been given almost a quarter of a century earlier than Bugenhagen's publication of his exposition on Jonah with his opinion on the *Comma Johanneum* (1550). Therefore, it is now understandable that Bugenhagen wrote only about Erasmus, to whom one should be grateful that he had pointed out the unauthentic character of verse 7, that only one Greek manuscript had it, and that also many old Latin manuscripts lacked it. Jerome was the one who was responsible for the *additio* of verse 7, as he himself had pointed out in his prologue to the Catholic Epistles. In Bugenhagen's opinion, Erasmus was not correct to have accepted the verse in his later editions. Philologically and text-critically Bugenhagen was indebted to Erasmus (as was Luther); theologically Bugenhagen was a Lutheran who believed with Luther in the Trinity<sup>20</sup> but not on the basis of 1 John 5:7. The pastor Bugenhagen and the professor Luther deleted verse 7 because of its incongruity with the context. Bugenhagen developed the Lutheran position further and spoke of the "Arian blasphemy" contained in the added verse.

Why did Bugenhagen feel compelled to write at all about this problem? He did so chiefly because in 1549 a volume of gospels and epistles was printed in Wittenberg in which the debated 1 John 5:7 was included<sup>21</sup> quite in contrast to Luther's teaching. Apparently, as we have seen, Bugenhagen knew Luther's position and therefore protested against the inclusion of the verse in such a publication; but since Luther had not published his lectures on 1 John, nor had his students edited their notes on the lectures, Bugenhagen could not refer at all to Luther's position but only to Erasmus'.

Melanchthon, on the other hand, who was not present in Wittenberg when Luther lectured on 1 John, had made use of 5:7 in his revised *Common Places* of 1535 as proof of the nature of the Holy Spirit. Martin Chemnitz in his *Loci Theologici* of 1556 defended verse 7 as authentic, while Matthias Flacius used the verse in his *Clavis Scripturae Sacrae*.<sup>22</sup> These Lutherans were un-Lutheran in regard to the *Comma Johanneum*, mainly because they did not know of Luther's lectures as Bugenhagen did. These inconsistencies in the Lutheran

Church must be attributed to the neglect of Luther's lectures on a Johannine text. In the light of these inconsistencies the error may be excused which today is still found in the American Edition of Luther's works: "The so-called Johannine Comma had been omitted from the first edition of Erasmus' Greek New Testament; its appearance in subsequent editions accounts for its translation into the standard versions, including Luther's own."<sup>23</sup> That this statement is not correct in regard to "Luther's own" version we have seen from the examination of Luther's *Table Talk* and the lecture notes of his students. Bugenhagen had conjured all printers and learned men to leave out this verse because of Arian blasphemy.

#### ENDNOTES

1. Cf. Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther in Mid-Career, 1521-1530* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), p. 555.
2. Cf. *Weimarer Ausgabe* (=WA) 20: 599-801. It is my working hypothesis that Bugenhagen was a course participant.
3. Cf. WA Br 4:232,25 with n. 19 on p. 233.
4. Cf. WA 23:323-373.
5. WA 20: 713,27-29 (P), *Luther's Works* (=LW) 30:277-8.
6. Cf. WA Br 4:275,12-276,28. Cf. 269,14-15.
7. WA 48: 688,15-20(No.7101).
8. In WA 20 there are Probst's notes (=P) on which the printed version of 1708 is based and thereupon the English translation in LW 30. Also in WA 20 there are Rörer's notes (=R), which are generally considered the most precise notes among all of Luther's students' lecture notes. In WA 48: 313-23 there are "scholia" (=S) on 1 John attributed by the WA editor to Luther as lecture preparation notes. I prefer to take these so-called scholia as an anonymous Saxon student's lecture notes. It is my speculation that this source could be the chaplain Johannes Mantel's notes, if he was indeed a course participant. All that we know is that Mantel was in Wittenberg at the time of the course on 1 John offered by Luther in 1527. See note 3 on Luther's letter.
9. WA 48: 688,15-20(No.7101).
10. Cf. Ezra Abbot, "1 John V. 7 and Luther's German Bible," *The Authorship of the Fourth Gospel and Other Critical Essays Selected from the Published Papers of the Late Ezra Abbot* (Boston: G. H. Ellis, 1888), p. 460.
11. The arguments of the WA editor to take this source to the Luther's own preparatory notes are questionable. It is not the place here to enter into a detailed discussion. See my dissertation, "Luther's Catholic Christology according to

- His Johannine Lectures of 1527" (Marquette University, Milwaukee, 1984; University Microfilms International, No. 85-02593, pp. 29-40.
12. LW 30: 316. See note 8.
  13. WA 20: 781,27.
  14. WA 20: 780,21-781,2.
  15. I used the copy of the Newberry Library (Chicago), p.617. On Erasmus' positions see Henk Jan de Jonge, "Erasmus and the *Comma Johanneum*," *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 56 (1980):381-88. Still very valuable is August Bludau's study, "Der Beginn der Controverse über die Aechtheit des *Comma Johanneum* (1 Joh. 5,7. 8.) im 16 Jahrhundert," *Der Katholik* 26(1902):25-51 and 151-175.
  16. *Ionas Propheta Expositus* (Wittenberg, 1550), as referred to by A. Bludau, "Das Comma Ioanneum (1 Io. 5,7) im 16. Jahrhundert," *Biblische Zeitschrift* 1(1903):393 ("Blasphemie der Arianer").
  17. Cf. *ibid.* See also Lic Vogt, "Melanchthons und Bugenhagens Stellung zum Interim und die Rechtfertigung des letzteren in seinem Jonascommentar," *Jahrbücher für protestantische Theologie* (1887), pp. 33-34: "Er beschwört dabei die Buchdrucker, die fälschlich eingeschobenen Worte v. 7 aus den Bibeln fernzuhalten . . ." (p.33).
  18. Cf. *ibid.*, see n. 16.
  19. Cf. *ibid.*, see n. 16.
  20. Cf. WA 18: 606,24-28: "Christ the Son of God is made man. God is triune and one. Christ suffered for us and will rule eternally."
  21. Cf. A. Bludau, *Biblische Zeitschrift* 1 (1903):379.
  22. Cf. *ibid.*, 390-402 Note that Cardinal Cajetan had doubts about the authenticity of verse 7; cf. *ibid.*, 402-3. Calvin was undecided; cf. *ibid.*, 392. Zwingli, following the early Erasmian deletion of verse 7, did not refer to it at all in his *In Epistolam Joannis Canonicam Expositio* (Opera, VI:2; Turici ex Officina Schulthessiana, 1838), p. 338.
  23. LW 30: 316, n.13.