PAUL AND THE CARE OF THE POOR DURING THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY: A CASE STUDY

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Poverty and the care of the poor were lofty challenges for 16th-century European society. They also became necessary priorities for both the Roman and the evangelical ecclesiastical communities. Social, political, economic, and theological changes demanded that poverty, begging, and the care of the poor be reconsidered and re-envisioned. Since this time period was a vibrantly religious age, biblical interpretations and theological perspectives informed and even shaped both theoretical presuppositions and practical reform proposals. The apostle Paul and what was understood to be his corpus of canonical writings played a normative role in the theological debates of the Reformation era. While Martin Luther’s interpretation of Paul has been a lively topic of scholarly debate, it is clear that the initiator of the Reformation considered the evangelical doctrine of justification to be a faithful exposition of Pauline biblical theology and, hence, of the gospel. That doctrine, which became the center piece of Reformation theology, impacted the social-ethical insights and proposals of Luther, Jean Calvin, and other Protestant reformers. Paul was also an important biblical authority for the Roman tradition. However, the questions of whether and how Paul influenced 16th-century poor relief have been left essentially unanswered by modern Reformation scholarship. This chapter is, therefore, intended to serve as a preliminary exploration of those questions. It also seeks to offer initial answers. In order to accomplish those goals, it will focus particularly on the poor relief proposals of Johannes Bugenhagen. That focus is justified because the Pomeranian Reformer was one of the most important and influential proponents of the care of the poor during the Reformation period, and his church orders are one of the most extensive collections of 16th-century sources dealing with poor relief. His proposals did not address only one city or even one territory but much of northern Germany and parts of Scandinavia. As the specifics of Bugenhagen’s practical proposals are described and analyzed, the use of Paul by the Reformer and the impact of the Pauline writings on his recommendations will became apparent. Bugenhagen’s use of Paul is quite similar to that of other 16th-century reformers who address the
care of the poor. Hence, this analysis of Bugenhagen’s church orders functions as a focused, though representative, case study of the influence of Paul on poor relief during the century of the Reformation.

Johannes Bugenhagen (1485–1558), known to his contemporaries as Dr. Pomeranus, was one of Luther’s closest and most significant colleagues. After joining the Reformation movement in 1521, he served as pastor of St. Mary’s church in Wittenberg; general superintendent of the churches in Electoral Saxony; professor at the University of Wittenberg; leading evangelical theologian, with particular contributions to sacramental theology and the relationship of faith and works; writer of massive biblical commentaries; and organizational genius of the Lutheran Reformation. Modern historical scholarship recognizes particularly this latter role, and it was in that role that he produced his church orders. Bugenhagen either wrote or significantly impacted eight church orders.1 By means of these orders he helped to stabilize and to give practical direction to the Reformation movement, especially in the cities and territories of northern Germany and Scandinavia. The church orders addressed particularly three major ecclesiastical concerns, namely, liturgical matters, education, and the care of the poor. While the orders contain some theological and theoretical materials, particularly in the liturgical section, they are primarily practical documents which give precise and detailed guidelines regarding the worship life, educational institutions and curricula, and poor relief efforts of the Lutheran communities. It is in the third section that Bugenhagen articulated precise and detailed instructions for the establishment of an evangelical system of poor relief centered on the poor chest.2

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1 Bugenhagen’s Kirchenordnungen, or church orders, are those of Braunschweig (1528), Hamburg (1529), Lübeck (1531), Pomerania (1535), Denmark (1537), Schleswig-Holstein (1542), Braunschweig-Wollenbüttel (1543), and Hildesheim (1544). With the exceptions of the Danish and Schleswig-Holstein orders, critical editions of the Bugenhagen church orders have been published in Emil Sehling, ed., Die evangelischen Kirchenordnungen des XVI. Jahrhunderts, 15 vols (Leipzig and Tübingen, 1902–80). Hereafter referred to as Sehling plus volume number. Bugenhagen did not write the Schleswig-Holstein church order, although he approved it and added an introduction. Because of these realities and since it was clearly shaped by and reflects Bugenhagen’s ideas, it is generally included in the corpus of his church orders.

2 For a discussion of Bugenhagen’s poor relief system see Tim Lorentzen, Johannes Bugenhagen als Reformator der öffentlichen Fürsorge, Spätmittelalter, Humanismus, Reformation, vol. 44 (Tübingen, 2008). This work was not consulted because it was published after the chapter was submitted. See also Frank P. Lane, “Poverty and Poor Relief in the German Church Orders of Johann Bugenhagen, 1485–1558,” (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, The Ohio State University, 1973) and Kurt K. Hendel, “The Care of the Poor: An Evangelical Perspective,” Currents in Theology and Mission, 15,6 (December, 1988), pp. 526–532.