

BOOK REVIEW

Mario Fischer and Thomas-Andreas Pöder (eds). 2025. *Die Kirche Jesu Christi / The Church of Jesus Christ: The Contribution of the Reformation towards Ecumenical Dialogue on Church Unity*

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The sixth revised edition of this landmark document of the Leuenberg Church Fellowship – now the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE) – arrives at a moment when questions of ecclesial identity, visible unity and the missional credibility of Protestant churches have lost none of their urgency. Originally adopted at the Fourth General Assembly in Vienna-Lainz on 9 May 1994, *The Church of Jesus Christ* represents the first shared self-reflection of the Reformation churches in Europe on the nature, marks and mission of the church. Republished here in a bilingual critical edition under the editorship of Mario Fischer and Thomas-Andreas Pöder, the volume makes this ecumenical study document accessible to a new generation of scholars and practitioners. This review focuses on the full text of the study document as reproduced in the appendix to the German edition, where the English version (*The Church of Jesus Christ: The Contribution of the Reformation towards Ecumenical Dialogue on Church Unity*) is published in its entirety.

The document is structured around three interlocking movements. Chapter I establishes a theological ontology of the church, grounding ecclesial existence in the justifying action of the triune God (§1.1). The church is confessed as *creatura Verbi* – constituted not from below by sociological aggregation but from above by the living witness of the gospel as the instrument of the Holy Spirit (§1.2). This Reformation axiom shapes the document's entire approach: the unity, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity of the church are not aspirational programmes but given attributes of divine origin (§2.3). The document's treatment of the *notae ecclesiae*

(§2.4) is theologically precise and ecumenically significant. It distinguishes, with Lutheran and Reformed confessional sources, between the classic marks of word and sacrament and the further marks discussed by Luther in *Von den Konzilien und Kirchen* (1539), including discipline, suffering and the obedience of the second table. Crucially, the text insists that “word and sacrament are the primary, i.e. the original and elementary marks of the true church” (§2.4.3), while simultaneously integrating “witness and service” (*Zeugnis und Dienst*) as constitutive of both ecclesial structure and individual Christian life (§2.5). This nuanced articulation avoids two recurrent pathologies: an activist ecclesiology that dissolves proclamation into social service, and a liturgical quietism that severs the gathered community from its commission in the world.

From the perspective of missional church theory, Chapter II is the document's most provocative contribution. Here the Leuenberg theologians confront the plural, post-Christendom context of European societies with remarkable directness. The church is called to be simultaneously confessing, pastoral, helping, and prophetically critical – and, above all, *missionary* (§2.5). The text argues that the church's openness towards the world “is not rooted in its social context, but in the gospel itself” (§2.6), a formulation that anticipates later discussions in the missional church literature about the distinction between mission as ecclesial programme and mission as *missio Dei* participation. The four dimensions of Christian commission – *leiturgia*, *martyria*, *diakonia* and *koinonia* (§3.2) – are not presented as discrete functions but as unified expressions of election and calling. The document's attention to the Volk-skirche problematic (§3.2) and to the witness potential of minority church situations is pastorally realistic without lapsing into ecclesiological romanticism.

Chapter III engages the ecumenical implications of the Reformation understanding of church unity. The document's foundational claim – that agreement in the understanding of the gospel as the message of justification is both *necessary and sufficient* for church communion in word and sacrament (§1.1, §1.3) – constitutes what it calls a “model of unity” (§4) that the CPCE commends to the wider *oikumene*. The document employs the concept of “unity in reconciled diversity” to describe the fellowship achieved through the Leuenberg Agreement, a concept that has entered the broader ecumenical vocabulary. The treatment of the compatibility of bilateral dialogues (§3.2) is particularly instructive for churches navigating multiple ecumenical commitments simultaneously.

Several critical observations deserve attention. First, the document's ecclesiological method, while theologically rigorous, operates largely within the parameters of classical confessionalism. The interplay between pneumatology and ecclesiology, though present (§1.2–1.3), is less developed than one might expect given the pneumatological renaissance in ecumenical theology since the Canberra Assembly (1991), which the document itself references. Second, the section on dialogue with other

religions (§3.2) reflects the cautious consensus of its 1994 context; subsequent CPCE studies, including *Church and Israel* (2001), have developed these trajectories further, as the editors acknowledge in a footnote. Third, the document's sociological diagnosis of plural societies, while perceptive for its time, predates the post-secular turn and the emergence of digital culture as a theological locus – challenges that contemporary readers will need to supplement from elsewhere.

These limitations notwithstanding, *The Church of Jesus Christ* remains an ecclesiological achievement of considerable stature. Its integration of justification theology, ecclesiology, and missiology in a single coherent framework anticipates much of what the missional church conversation has struggled to articulate. The document's insistence that "the activity of the church must point away from itself" (§2.2) – that ecclesial practice gains credibility precisely when it witnesses to the justifying action of the triune God rather than to its own institutional competence – reads as prophetic against the backdrop of contemporary institutional church decline. The call for churches to remain "recognizable" (§2.6) in plural societies through gathering around word and sacrament while remaining genuinely open to the world offers a coherent alternative to both sectarian withdrawal and cultural accommodation.

The bilingual format of this sixth edition, making the document simultaneously accessible to German-language and international scholarly communities, is an editorial decision that reflects well the CPCE's own commitment to the "fullest possible cooperation in witness and service" (Leuenberg Agreement §29). Readers of *Ecclesial Futures* with interests in Protestant ecclesiology, ecumenical theology and the theology of mission will find this document an indispensable interlocutor.

About the Reviewer

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