

Witness and Service to the World

Discovering Protestant Church Renewal in Europe¹

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The common feature of the churches joining the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE) is obviously that they belong to the church family of the Reformation. Therefore it will come as no surprise that the issue of a continuous reformation is of considerable importance for this ecumenical church community. This is also why the quest for “witness and service to the world”, although it stems from the ecumenical discourse (Leuenberg Agreement, art. 29), will herein function as a key to the contemporary concern of *church renewal* in European Protestantism.² In what follows I will examine this issue under three aspects which all come out of the phrase *ecclesia semper reformanda*. My first section understands church renewal to be an ongoing concern, thus focusing on the *semper*. I call this the pragmatism impact (I). Then I will turn to the *ecclesia* by asking what the implicit ecclesiologies of contemporary church renewal are. This is what I call the ecclesiological impact (II). The concluding section will deal with the general tasks church renewal has, if it is understood in the way I suggest. Since this obviously refers to the *reformanda*, I call it the reform impact (III).

¹ This paper is based on a presentation of mine as a delegate of the Evangelical Church of Pomerania for the first meeting of the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE) 2009–12 Consultation Process on Church Renewal in Berlin on October 17th, 2009.

² In an article published earlier in this journal, I have suggested understanding one of the most important European ecumenical documents of the last years, the *Charta Oecumenica* (2001), in terms of the church renewal processes: Henning THEIßEN, “Konsens nach der Konsens-ökumene: Hermeneutische Erwägungen zur Charta Oecumenica”, in *NZStTh* 51 (2009), 76–91. Basic literature on the theological relationship between the churches and Europe includes: Martin FRIEDRICH/Hans-Jürgen LUIBL/Christine-Ruth MÜLLER (ed.), *Theology for Europe: Perspectives of Protestant Churches* (Frankfurt: Lembeck 2006); Wilhelm HÜFFMEIER/Martin FRIEDRICH (ed.), *Gemeinschaft gestalten: Evangelisches Profil in Europa* (Frankfurt: Lembeck, 2007); Friedrich SCHWEITZER/Christoph SCHWÖBEL (ed.), *Theology's Contribution to Europe* (Veröffentlichungen der Wissenschaftlichen Gesellschaft für Theologie 32; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2008).

I. The Pragmatical Impact: Discovering the Church

It seems almost natural for protestant churches to understand their communities to be *ecclesia semper reformanda*, i.e. a church in constant need of reform. Also the new Consultation Process launched by the CPCE works under the motto of *ecclesia semper reformanda*. The Latin phrase insinuates that the words are as old as the idea expressed by them, but this is not the case. In fact it seems to originate from the 20th century only, namely the epoch of the Barmen Theological Declaration, since Karl Barth dropped rather than coined the Latin words in a lecture on Barmen in 1947, as five years before the so-entitled *Festschrift* for Ernst Wolf used the phrase in a programmatic way for the first time. Theodor Mahlmann's thorough investigations of the term³ have enabled scholars to trace the history behind it back to the year 1610, when a Lutheran theologian named Balduin wrote that reform was a constant issue for the church. As Mahlmann points out, Balduin was the first theologian who stressed the need for a constant reformation, thereby anticipating the *semper* of the later term. For unlike a solitary improvement, only a constant reform allows for a primordial idea of the church that is apt to judge any timely state of this church. The meaning of the term *ecclesia semper reformanda* therefore is to bring the church's reality closer and closer to that primordial idea. Strikingly enough, though, it was no other than Ernst Wolf who bluntly denied that the reformation of the church could be understood in terms of idea and reality; he even opened up an unbridgeable gap between the Reformation and the Roman-Catholic (as it seemed to him) idea of church renewal.⁴

Following Mahlmann's results, we can therefore state that the term *ecclesia semper reformanda* is completely at odds with the theology of the man in whose honour it was programmatically used for the first time. Yet, Mahlmann's observations prove true only from a semantic point of view. But this is not the only point of view. What a term denotes is not necessarily identical with what it actually says. And that is also the case with the term *ecclesia semper reformanda*. Indeed, the editors of the *Festschrift* for Ernst Wolf give an explanation of the title in a sentence in their preface

³ Theodor MAHLMANN, Art. "Reformation", in *HWP* 8 (Basel: Schwabe, 1992), 414–427; MAHLMANN, "Ecclesia semper reformanda: Eine historische Aufklärung", in *Theologie und Kirchenleitung (Festschrift für Peter Steinacker)*, ed. by Hermann DEUSER/Gesche LINDE/Sigurd RINK (MThSt 75; Marburg: N. Elwert, 2003), 57–77. For Barth's 1947 reference to the phrase cf. Karl BARTH, *Texte zur Barmer Theologischen Erklärung: Mit einer Einleitung von Eberhard Jüngel und einem Editionsbericht*, ed. by Martin ROHKRÄMER (Zürich: TVZ, 2004), 156.

⁴ Ernst WOLF, "'Erneuerung der Kirche' im Licht der Reformation: Zum Problem von 'Alt' und 'Neu' in der Kirchengeschichte [1947]", in WOLF, *Peregrinatio*, vol. 2: *Studien zur reformatorischen Theologie, zum Kirchenrecht und zur Sozialethik* (München: Chr. Kaiser, 1965), 139–160, here: 152.

which is not considered by Mahlmann: "The title to the contributions understands itself to be a refusal to the Restauration of nowadays."⁵ The use of the term Restauration, which normally denotes a certain age of European history following Congress of Vienna, shows that this sentence contains a good deal of polemics and cannot therefore be understood by means of semantics alone. What it refuses is not the Restauration epoch in church history, to which it refers semantically, but rather a contemporary attitude towards the reconstruction of the Protestant churches after World War II. This attitude pretends to simply reconstruct the churches of the pre-Nazi epoch just as if the ecclesiological decisions of the Church Struggle were obsolete after the defeat of the Third Reich and its church policy. The polemics against any such a reactionary attitude is the pragmatic aspect of the term *ecclesia semper reformanda*. It appears to me that using the Latin language is part of the polemics, as for a pragmatic understanding, the term *ecclesia semper reformanda* appears like a counterpiece to the term *ecclesia perpetuo mansura* from the *Augsburg Confession* (art. 7), which denotes the indissoluble, otherworldly existence of the church – a feature that invites reactionary views on the allegedly eternal nature of the church.

There is evidence that some theologians of our time mistake the otherworldliness of the church in such a way. For example, in a book on the *Augsburg Confession* published in 1980, the famous Danish Lutheran scholar Regin Prenter of Aarhus consistently speaks of the "*ecclesia perpetua mansura*",⁶ mistaking the adverb for an attribute and thus turning the otherworldliness into a property of the church. Admittedly, the semantics of the term *ecclesia perpetuo mansura*⁷ does not exclude but even supports Prenter's understanding, since in Reformation times the idea of an otherworldly church refers to a church of believers who died in a state of personal holiness, in short: it would be the church of the late saints and thus otherworldliness would clearly be a property of the church and its members. The fathers of the Reformation, however, challenged the common view of holiness. In their understanding a saint could not be holy due to the personal holiness achieved throughout their lifetime, but only due to their belief in God's grace. Therefore in Reformation thought, all believers are saints, and the otherworldliness of the church is not a certain range

⁵ *Ecclesia semper reformanda (Festschrift for Ernst Wolf)*, ed. by Karl Gerhard STECK/Wilhelm SCHNEEMELCHER (*EvTh Sonderheft*; München: Chr. Kaiser, 1952), 2. The translation is my own for the German: "Als Absage an alle Restauration möchte auch die Überschrift verstanden werden, unter die wir die Beiträge gestellt haben."

⁶ Regin PRENTER, *Das Bekenntnis von Augsburg: Eine Auslegung* (Erlangen: Martin-Luther-Verlag, 1980), 98–99.

⁷ Cf. Wilhelm MAURER, "Ecclesia perpetuo mansura im Verständnis Luthers" [1966], in MAURER, *Kirche und Geschichte. Gesammelte Aufsätze*, vol. 1: *Luther und das evangelische Bekenntnis*, ed. by Ernst-Wilhelm KOHRES/Gerhard MÜLLER (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1970), 62–75.

beyond the line of death, but rather the influence of God's graceful acting towards the church of believers. This is why the famous catechisms of the Reformation era (Luther's Small and Large Catechisms, the Heidelberg Catechism) emphasize that the formula *communio sanctorum* of the Apostolic Creed does not only include the late saints, but much more "myself", i.e. the individual believer on earth.⁸ Thus the otherness of the otherworldly church is not beyond the line of death, but rather beyond the line of demarcation between man and God. The church is otherworldly because it lives on the graceful acts of God, who is other than man.

To sum up, the term *ecclesia perpetuo mansura* denotes *semantically* the otherworldliness of the church. Its use in the *Augsburg Confession*, however, must be understood *pragmatically* to insist on the difference between man and God, which is the fundamental difference in Reformation thought. Prenter's example shows how necessary it is to insist on that pragmatical understanding in order to avoid the misunderstanding of perpetuity to be an attribute of the church itself. Of course, the difference between man and God is anything but unknown to a theologian like Prenter. We can even say that a semantic understanding of both terms – *ecclesia semper reformanda* and *ecclesia perpetuo mansura* – aims for maintaining that very difference since either term distinguishes areas or realms of the church that are perpetual from ones which need to be reformed, the latter open to human efforts in renewal, whereas the perpetual areas of the church are considered divine gifts. The widespread terms of the invisible and the visible church, of a church in belief and a church in experience, or even of a divine inside and a human outside of the church (which is one of the more recent attempts to reconstruct the doctrine of the church),⁹ whenever they are understood in terms of semantics, follow the same pattern of distinguishing divine realms of the church from human ones. In fact, this pattern of distinct realms of the church is what a semantic understanding of the concept of the church inevitably leads to, since semantics relates words to a realm of meaning. Considering what we have learned about the otherworldliness and holiness of the church, we must however say that distinguishing human realms of the church from divine ones is at odds with the difference between man and God as it appears in Reformation thought. Here the difference is not *between certain realms* of the church, but rather *across all realms* of the church, since the church can be otherworldly within this very world, and it can be holy in the midst of the profane. It is therefore impossible to define the church. It was for this reason that the Reformers developed their doctrine of the marks of the church (*notae ec-*

⁸ *Evangelische Bekenntnisse: Bekenntnisschriften der Reformationszeit und neuere Theologische Erklärungen*, ed. by Rudolf MAU, vol. 2 (Bielefeld: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1997), 21; 93 (Luther's Small resp. Large Catechism); 153 (Heidelberg Catechism, qq. 54–55).

⁹ Wilfried HÄRLE, Art. "Kirche VII", in *TRE* 18 (Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 1989), 277–317, here: 292.

clesiae),¹⁰ which reveal the hidden nature of the true church under the world as well as under its own ecclesial reality. So the Protestant understanding of the *ecclesia semper reformanda* as well as of the *ecclesia perpetuo mansura* is to discover the *hidden* church pragmatically within its worldly situation.

All these observations lead me to my first thesis on the problem of Protestant church renewal.

Thesis 1: Since the distinction between man and God, which is fundamental to the Reformers' understanding of the church, does not allow for defining semantically the divine and the human realms within the church, but rather goes right through the church concept itself, Protestant church renewal cannot simply follow the guidelines of some primordial concept or ideal vision of the church, but has to *discover* the true church pragmatically within its worldly situation of today.

II. *The Ecclesiological Impact: The Pragmatics of Discovering Dogmatics*

If Reformation theology even in so prominent a text as the 7th article of the Augsburg Confession does not offer a dogmatic definition of the church, then it is interesting to find the late church historian Klaus Scholder of Tübingen celebrating the Barmen Declaration for its "protestant definition of the church", which he says has been missing since the Reformation era.¹¹ He refers to the 3rd thesis of the Declaration which calls the church a "community of brethren",¹² thereby adding an important feature to word and sacrament: the notion of belonging together. Thus the church is more than the sum of its members, and the members are more than mere exemplars of a specified class. But does this make a definition? The Theological Board of the Evangelical Church of the Union (EKU) in their commentary on this 3rd thesis also claimed that it was an important progress in comparison to the 7th article of the Augsburg Confession.¹³ So we have to ask: In what way can the "community of brethren" be understood to improve what the *Augsburg Confession* has to say about the church? I will examine this issue by contextualizing the documents in question.

¹⁰ Reacting to what seems to be a standard Lutheran interpretation of the *notae ecclesiae*, I have dealt with the topic of the hidden church at some length in my essay: Henning THEISSEN, "Das Erkennungszeichen der Kirche", in *EvTh* 68 (2008), 332–347.

¹¹ Klaus SCHOLDER, "Die Bedeutung des Barmer Bekenntnisses für Theologie und Kirche", in *EvTh* 27 (1967), 435–461, here: 442.

¹² *Evangelische Bekenntnisse* (see above, n. 7), vol. 2, 261.

¹³ *Kirche als "Gemeinde von Brüdern": Votum des Theologischen Ausschusses der Evangelischen Kirche der Union zu Barmen III*, ed. by Alfred BURGSMÜLLER, vol. 2 (Veröffentlichung des Theologischen Ausschusses der Evangelischen Kirche der Union; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1981), 44.

It is a well-known fact that there have been attempts to enrich the seemingly poor concept of the church which the *Augsburg Confession* offers almost ever since the Confession was published. The most important of these attempts refer to the ordained ministry of the church. Already in the 1590s the Roman-Catholic cardinal Robert Bellarmine created the doctrine of the three bonds (*tria vincula*) holding the church together: creed, liturgy, and hierarchic ministry. And we can safely say that in ecumenical discourse nowadays the ordained ministry is overwhelmingly important for an ecumenical church concept. However, if we consider the progress from Augsburg to Barmen to be about the ministry, we cannot escape the question whether the ordained ministry must be considered a third mark of the church (*nota ecclesiae*) besides word and sacrament, which would mean that the ministry was not just indispensable but even constitutive for the church as a whole. In this case Barmen's alleged progress would rather be an abolition of Augsburg, where it is clearly stated that there are no other prerequisites for the unity of the church than word and sacrament.¹⁴

It seems, however, that this is not what the ECU study from 1981 argues for. The progress it has in mind can be best explained by lighting up its background in contemporary church history. The study is part of the impressive project of a comprehensive commentary on the Barmen Declaration, which the ECU began in 1971 and completed in 1999. The starting-point of this project was a remarkable study dealing with the political mandate of the church (1974)¹⁵ – a very controversial issue in a time when the conflict across the iron curtain (which also split the ECU itself in half) became more and more serious. In fact, the study had to be published with an annex containing the divergent opinion of one of the board members, and moreover, the board was unable to agree on the consequences to be drawn for the life of the churches in Western and in Eastern German society. Several passages tailored especially for the churches in Eastern Germany could not be published beyond the frontiers of the German Democratic Republic until a separate print one year later.¹⁶ Despite these incoherencies (or perhaps even due to them) the study found an unexpectedly vivid echo in theological and ecclesial discourse, and it was this echo

¹⁴ *Confessio Augustana*, Art. 7 (*Evangelische Bekenntnisse* [see above, n. 8], vol. 1, 39).

¹⁵ *Zum politischen Auftrag der christlichen Gemeinde (Barmen II): Votum des Theologischen Ausschusses der Evangelischen Kirche der Union*, ed. by Alfred BURGMÜLLER (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus 1974).

¹⁶ Cf. Martin STIEWE, "Die Geschichte der Auslegung der Barmer Theologischen Erklärung durch den Theologischen Ausschuß der ECU", in *Der Dienst der ganzen Gemeinde Jesu Christi und das Problem der Herrschaft [Barmen IV]*, vol. 1: *Vorträge aus dem Theologischen Ausschuß der ECU*, ed. by Joachim OCHSEL (Veröffentlichung des Theologischen Ausschusses der ECU; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1999), 150–175, here 158. An introduction to the commentary project can be found in Wolf-Dieter HAUSCHILD, *Konfliktgemeinschaft Kirche. Aufsätze zur Geschichte der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland* (AKIZ B 40; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004), 140–179.

that promoted the decision to continue theological work on the Barmen Declaration.

Some time after the publication of the 1974 study, the Theological Board was asked to prepare a study in ecclesiology, but this topic turned out to be no less controversial among the Board members. As a result of this, the chairman of the Board, Walter Kreck of Bonn, resigned from his position and left the Board in January 1978, a few months after the preparing consultations had begun. The study itself hardly gives any hint to Kreck's reasons for this decision, but in 1981, when it was eventually released under the title "The Church as a community of brethren (Barmen III)", Kreck published a short excursus in his own book on ecclesiology, which dealt with the alternative of either "community of brethren or structures of power?"¹⁷ Here Kreck explained what he thought was a community of brethren. Brotherhood in the church, according to him, means that Christians cannot be divorced over issues of contemporary understanding of the gospel. Since there is only one gospel, a church founded on the gospel cannot draw basically divergent conclusions from that same gospel. The context Kreck most probably had in mind was the debate in the German church and public concerning nuclear armament.

The NATO Double-Track Decision (taken in December 1979) was a most vigorous stimulus to that debate, but it had dominated the field of peace ethics since the 1950s when German re-armament took place. Ever since the famous Heidelberg Theses (1959) by Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker (and others), there had been two nearly irreconcilable positions in Protestant peace ethics, one absolutely refusing nuclear weapons, and one regarding them a device of peace-building that is "nowadays still possible" to take for a Christian ethics.¹⁸ In such a context the query for a community of brethren meant to go across the boundaries or even front-lines not only of the inner-church discourse, but also of the political constellation: as Kreck insinuated in a short article replying to theses of Helmut Gollwitzer,¹⁹ the task of an ecclesiology of brotherhood was to intensify the intellectual and theological exchange with Marxist social sciences in order to help bring forth a Christian witness for peace together with the Christians in the countries of the Warsaw Pact. I believe this task of a common West-Eastern peace witness to be Kreck's deepest interest in the theological investigation of the community of brethren, and although (or rather since)

¹⁷ Walter KRECK, *Grundfragen der Ekklesiologie* (München: Chr. Kaiser, 1981), 192–208. This excursus (196) borrows formulations from the letter Kreck had written to inform the Board about his withdrawal, cf. STIEWE, "Auslegung der Barmer Theologischen Erklärung" (see above, n. 16), 161.

¹⁸ *Die Denkschriften der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland*, ed. by Kirchenamt der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland, vol. I/3 (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus 1999), 89–100.

¹⁹ Walter KRECK, "Kirche und Kirchenorganisation: Anfragen an Helmut Gollwitzers Kirchenthesen", in *EvTh* 38 (1978), 518–526, here: 526.

there is no direct evidence in the EKU study, I think that the insinuations given in Kreck's mentioned texts make it plausible that this was the controversy which made him resign from his position.

Given this historical context of the studies which claim the Barmen "community of brethren" to improve the ecclesiology of the *Augsburg Confession*, we must now ask what the ecclesiological implications of the claimed improvement are. First of all, it should be emphasized that Kreck's plea for an intellectual exchange with Marxist thought does not mean a vote for Marxist politics. The issue is not about politics, but about policy. The question is whether the church, due to its being a social entity within today's world and society, should be understood to be politically relevant. Therefore, Kreck's related plea for a unanimous understanding of the gospel among Christians also does not mean to urge them to take this-or-that particular standpoint, it rather demands that any particular standpoint Christians may take must be a recognizably Christian standpoint. In other words, what Kreck rejects is the opinion his younger colleague at Bonn, Martin Honecker, began to spread at that time, namely that there is no material difference between Christian ethics and profane ethics except for the reasons and motives of what both Christians and non-Christians do.²⁰ Kreck rather opts for a material Christian ethics, but he leaves open what particular shaping this ethics may have. Again, the community of brethren in Kreck's understanding is not a matter of politics but of policy. He insists that the church is in itself a politically relevant social entity, and it would continue to be so even if it focused completely on its own affairs, and, disregarding the world and society it lives in, did not do anything but preach the word of God and pass the sacraments to the believers, for within a world and society that is not based on word and sacrament the existence of such a church is of political relevance.²¹ Of course, this example of a church that shows no interest in world and society but fully concentrates on its own internal affairs is quite the extreme opposite of what Kreck pleads for. Yet perhaps it shows best what the implicit ecclesiology behind his concept is.

Since Kreck takes interest in the ethical corollaries of being church, we might speak of an ethical church concept, if this expression was not already linked with the ecclesiology of Albrecht Ritschl and his followers of today who, like Hans-Richard Reuter of Münster,²² try to reconcile the tension between the dogmatic and the political aspects of the church in an allegedly underlying ethical understanding of the church. According to

²⁰ Cf. e.g. Martin HONECKER, "Weltliches Handeln unter der Herrschaft Christi: Zur Interpretation von Barmen II", in *ZThK* 69 (1972), 72–99, here: 76.

²¹ Cf. Bernd WANNENWETSCH, *Gottesdienst als Lebensform: Ethik für Christenbürger* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1997).

²² Hans-Richard REUTER, *Botschaft und Ordnung: Beiträge zur Kirchentheorie* (ÖTh 22; Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2009), 26–55.

Ritschl the church is a community of people living in love of their neighbour and thereby living out the kingdom of God whose love is in the centre of that community. Far from neglecting the similarities to this concept, I wish to emphasize that the ethical corollaries which Kreck and the other members of the EKU Board discuss must be understood in a way that differs at a certain point clearly from what Ritschl has in mind. Within the concept of Ritschl's elliptic theology ethics can serve to validate the truth of Christian dogma, because it provides an issue of rational judgement whose scope is not limited to the church and therefore allows for some evidence to prove Christian truth claims even to those outside the church.²³ However, the ethical corollaries we have touched on when contextualizing the Barmen claim to improve the *Augsburg Confession* are not of that validating kind. The community of brethren does not validate or even prove the church's claim that word and sacrament constitute the community of justified believers in God's grace, but quite the other way around: that the church is a community of believers justified by God's grace, would hardly have been discovered, if this community – the *Barmen Declaration* calls it the community of brethren – had not been at stake in a particular situation of the church. The *Barmen Declaration* itself is such a situation where outer and, even more, inner threats urge Christians to discover what is really fundamental for their community so that they may confess it together regardless even of confessional boundaries between them – be they Lutheran, Reformed or United. Such was also the case with the *Augsburg Confession*, but no less with other contexts that may appear less threatening. The debate on nuclear armament may not constitute what was in the Reformers' days called the state of confession (*status confessionis*), but still there is enough of an equally charged atmosphere in this debate.

Kreck's unsuccessful concern for a community of brethren witnessing to peace in times of nuclear armament gives us a good idea how the EKU Board pragmatically discovered the costly good of brotherhood and unanimity precisely in the moment when it broke apart and put an end to the brotherly unanimity of the Board. So far from proving or validating dogmatic claims or charging them up to the state of confession, we should consider these ethical corollaries *contexts of discovery* for the fundamentals the church is based on dogmatically.

It is in these contexts *beyond* dogmatics that the dogmatic foundations of the church can be *discovered*. This is the first reason why it seems sensible to qualify these contexts as "contexts of discovery", using a term

²³ This understanding of Ritschl's elliptic theology (cf. Albrecht RITSCHL, *Die christliche Lehre von der Rechtfertigung und Versöhnung*, 2nd ed., vol. 3, [Bonn: A. Marcus, 1888], § 2, 11) is based on the theory of an "ethical proof" in the first paragraph of Ritschl's book (ibid., 8).

which Gerhard Sauter introduced into theology forty years ago²⁴ to mark its difference from the context of justification. The second is that since discovery of the true church is what church renewal means according to the first section of my paper, these ethical contexts of discovery must also be relevant for the issue of Protestant church renewal. It should be added, though, that these contexts are not merely of a ethical nature, although it is true that Sauter, when introducing the term, mainly had ethics in mind. But there can be other contexts of discovery like the ecumenical one. In the case of the EKU commentary on the Barmen Declaration, both contexts are linked to each other, since the Board, although it does not follow Kreck's plea for a theological discourse with Marxist social science, takes a firm stand for his ethical concept of a "community of brethren" as far as ecumenism is concerned. For a passage of the study treating the ecumenical discourse clearly states that ecclesial unity is to be looked for on a level below the "organisational entity" of the church.²⁵ This marks both the difference between the ethical and the ecumenical context of the church and their common ecclesiological implication. The difference between ecumenical and ethical contexts of the church is that the ecumenical ones focus on the institutional churches and their unity, whereas the ethical ones stress the political or public relevance of the church even without being a political entity or public institution itself. But what both have in common is that they *go beyond* the dogmatic church concept in order to *discover* the dogmatic fundamentals of the church. This is what makes these contexts important for church renewal, since renewing the church is to discover its hidden nature anew (cf. thesis 1).

As the twofold terminology of contexts suggests, any context of discovery has two aspects. On the one hand, it shows by going beyond the church that this church can be identified as the true church even within a context of extreme worldliness: this is expressed by the underlying doctrine of the *notae ecclesiae* in a *broader* sense of the word. On the other hand it goes thus beyond in order to discover the true fundamentals of the church, which according to Reformation theology consist in word and sacrament, the *notae ecclesiae* in the *narrower* sense of the word. Since both aspects of the context of discovery can be summed up in the notion of the *notae ecclesiae* in general, it will come as no surprise that there is a certain phrase combining both the ethical and the ecumenical context of discovery, thereby expressing best what Protestant church renewal means, and that is the phrase *witness and service*.

According to the Leuenberg Agreement from 1973, "Witness and Service" are the most important means of actualizing unity among the Protes-

²⁴ Gerhard SAUTER, "Die Begründung theologischer Aussagen – wissenschaftstheoretisch gesehen", in ZEE 15 (1971), 299–308.

²⁵ *Kirche als "Gemeinde von Brüdern"* (see above, n. 13), 94.

tant churches. The ecclesiological study “The Church of Jesus Christ” (1994/95), enacted by the Leuenberg Church Fellowship (meanwhile CPCE) some twenty years after the Leuenberg Agreement, states that witness and service are both marks of the church and of the Christian life, which is to say that they create a link between the narrower and the broader sense of the *notae ecclesiae*. Obviously, the phrase “witness and service” stems from an ecumenical context, but, given what has been said about the nature of the context of discovery in general, they can also be transferred to an ethical context. The church’s witness and service to the world therefore seem to be the field that church renewal can grow on. This concludes in the following thesis:

Thesis 2: The Leuenberg phrase “Witness and Service” (LA 29) provides several contexts of discovery (e.g. ethical or ecumenical) that extend beyond the church in order to discover the dogmatic fundamentals of the church. Exploring these contexts of discovery in order to find the ecclesiological context of justification for the church is what Protestant church renewal means.

III. *The Reform Impact: Discovering the World Reconciled*

The first two sections of this paper have argued that it is witness and service which best develop the dogmatic church concept into a pragmatical discovery of the church within its worldly situation. I would like to conclude by examining their significance for church renewal a bit further. First of all, it must be stated that there is a striking dialectics in them. It is not until the 1994/95 study “The Church of Jesus Christ” – and not yet in the Leuenberg Agreement (1973) – that the phrase “witness and service” is highlighted in such a way that it adopts a key role for understanding the church. But what the study says about the relationship between the two gives only a tentative impression, since the crucial passage of the document tries to rule out misunderstandings and thus fences some space for further investigation of the issue, but it does not offer any results of such investigation. “The Church of Jesus Christ” tells us that witness and service are both “marks of the visible church” and of Christian life (whose scope is wider than the church).²⁶ This implies, however, that they are not helpful for distinguishing the church from the world. It can be further observed that witness and service are not distinct areas or “separate realms” of the church (e.g. worship and charity), but rather different aspects of church life.²⁷ This calls to mind what we said in the beginning of our investiga-

²⁶ *The Church of Jesus Christ: The Contribution of the Reformation towards Ecumenical Dialogue on Church Unity*, by order of the Executive Committee for the Leuenberg Church Fellowship (Leuenberg Documents 1; Frankfurt: Otto Lembeck, 1995 [English translation of the official German text in the bilingual edition ed. by Wilhelm HÜFFMEIER]), 96.

²⁷ *The Church of Jesus Christ* (see above, n. 26), 96.

tions, namely that the distinction between human works and the work of God is not between realms of the church, but across them, so that there is no primordial, ideal concept of the church. From that we can infer that the term “witness and service” is not an adequate definition of the church, either. But what then is the formula good for? This is the dialectics we are faced with.

Another observation to be made here is that “The Church of Jesus Christ” at one point uses the formula as part of a fourfold differentiation of the church’s task comprising *leiturgia*, *martyria*, *diakonia*, and *koinonia*.²⁸ Witness and service are obviously translations of the Greek *martyria* and *diakonia*. Of course the fourfold formula does not explain much since it was originally threefold, as the late Hans-Christoph Schmidt-Lauber of Vienna has shown²⁹ – *koinonia* was added under the influence of the Roman-Catholic eucharistic ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council, which regards the church to be the community or *koinonia* of those communities that have community (or, again, *koinonia*) with Christ in the eucharist.³⁰ Yet we can take the fourfold formula as a hint to what the twofold phrase of witness and service means.

Leiturgia and *koinonia* refer to the constitution of the church in itself, i.e. they are directed inward to its centre in worship and particularly the eucharist and to the structure that can be derived from understanding the eucharist in terms of *koinonia*. In comparison to these two, witness and service are directed outward, “to the world”, as the Leuenberg Agreement says. So whilst witness and service are inadequate for distinguishing the church from the world as well as for defining the church, it is very plausible that they refer to the relationship the church entertains towards the world. This means that in its *service*, the church perceives the *world as the kingdom of God’s left hand*, whereas in its *witness*, the church perceives the *world as the kingdom of God’s right hand*.

In making this proposal, which draws on insights from Lutheran social ethics, I am well aware of possible objections from the stance of that very ethics: in Luther’s thought the world cannot be the kingdom of God’s right hand, and the addressee of the church’s witness is not the kingdom of God’s right hand but the world opposed to the church. However, if the doctrine of the two kingdoms is reformulated in hermeneutic terms, it can be stated that the church’s outward direction to the world in *service* is rather *addressee*-focused, whereas the same relationship is focused on the ecclesial *addressor* in the case of *witness*. The difference between witness

²⁸ *The Church of Jesus Christ* (see above, n. 26), 104–108.

²⁹ Hans-Christoph SCHMIDT-LAUBER, “Martyria – Leiturgia – Diakonia”, in *Quat* 45 (1981), 160–172. Cf. also Hans JANSSEN, “Über die Herkunft der Trias Martyria – Leiturgia – Diakonia”, in *ThPh* 85 (2010), 407–413.

³⁰ Cf. e.g. Wolfgang THÖNISSEN, *Gemeinschaft durch Teilhabe an Jesus Christus: Ein katholisches Modell für die Einheit der Kirchen* (Freiburg: Herder, 1996).

and service is therefore *not* about divergent *dogmatic* attitudes towards the world, but about different *hermeneutic* perspectives from which the world can be seen. But from any of these perspectives it will, in dogmatic terms, be the world God has reconciled with Himself. The world reconciled is the dogmatic fundamental on which the outward direction of both witness and service (in contrast to the inward direction of *leiturgia* and *koinonia*) is based.

I believe that this understanding of the outward direction of witness and service makes a helpful guideline for Protestant church renewal – not in the sense of some vision the renewal efforts would simply have to follow, but rather in comparison to the missionary “outward direction” that can be encountered in numerous examples of contemporary church renewal throughout Europe. In short, this outward direction is an attempt to overcome the paramount significance that Karl Barth’s imagery of the two concentric circles of church and society has had in ecclesiological discourse after World War II. In contrast to this, the “outward direction” of such reform programmes as the German *Church of Freedom* or the Scottish *A Church Without Walls* or the English *Fresh Expressions of the Church* means to *concentrate* ecclesial powers in a *decentral* direction towards those at the “highways and hedges” of the church (Luke 14:23) that practice their faith only on rare occasions like Christmas and the funeral. This missionary logic of an outward direction is at odds with the Barthian imagery of the concentric circles. So which of the two “outward logics” is adequate for a Protestant understanding of church renewal?

Neither, my concluding thesis will be, since within Barth’s writings on the issue, there is another (in fact a third) understanding of the church’s outward orientation, which is incompatible with either of the two. In contrast to them this third one (the third word, as Barth calls it³¹) is not semantically, but pragmatically oriented and comes out of the hermeneutic insight that there is no Protestant way of defining the semantic reach of the term “church” (cf. thesis 1). It is best expressed in the ecclesiological metaphor of the body of Christ, which, according to Barth’s “*Magna Charta*” of the Christian church, “comes at least very close to the concept of a body comprising all men”.³² In contrast to an outward direction concentrating on the decentral, this *Magna Charta* means for church renewal taking Holy Communion as a starting-point, since this is what constitutes the church as body of Christ. It should be noted that what the CPCE now calls European Protestantism began with a renewal on the field of Holy Communion, namely the demand for the laypeople’s cup which the Husites and the Waldesians already made decades before the Reformation. I

³¹ Karl BARTH, *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik*, vol. IV/3 (Zürich: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1959), 802–817.

³² Karl BARTH, *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik*, vol. IV/1 (Zürich: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1953), 743.

will shortly explain that in order to show the pragmatics of the ecclesiological *Magna Charta*.

In Holy Communion, the church celebrates, as one of its own fundamentals, a salvation whose fullness and entirety go far beyond the scope of the church. For the church does not have the entire Christ in Holy Communion unless he gives himself to it in the shape of both flesh and blood. Obviously then Christ in flesh and blood is in some way “more” than Christ in his flesh alone, although there can be no doubt that semantically speaking there is no difference in what the congregation receives in either bread or wine alone. The surplus of the laypeople’s cup in comparison to the bread can only be expressed in terms of pragmatics. By handing over the cup to unconsecrated people the church expresses a universal salvation of the world that is prior to all churchly distinctions between the sacred (like the clergy) and the profane (the laypeople). For a pragmatic concept of the church, we can conclude, the celebration of Holy Communion underlines that the church, even within its very centre that the eucharist represents, is nothing else than witness to a world reconciled with God. This is why the seemingly inner circle of the church is at the same time its widest possible horizon. It was a young Dietrich Bonhoeffer as an academic theologian at Berlin who discovered that the eucharistic liturgy in the seemingly anonymous situation of a major city centre parish can become an overwhelming “witness” of Christ.³³ It is this unpredictable kind of witness and service which points to the heart of Protestant Church Renewal by *simultaneously* pointing away from the church and to Christ’s spiritual presence within the church renewing it.³⁴ So my concluding thesis runs as follows:

Thesis 3: As the example of the Hussite and Waldesian demand for the laypeople’s cup shows, Protestant Church Renewal consists first and foremost in a deepened and renewed understanding and celebration of worship. Far from defining the church or separating it from the world, Holy Communion is the church’s unpredictable witness and service to the world, which proclaims that in the midst of the church there is nothing but God’s reconciling grace for the world in relation to which the church cannot but serve. The outward direction of a witness and service of this kind is opposed to the one many contemporary renewal projects suggest.

SUMMARY

This paper is based on the author’s presentation at the Church Renewal Consultations of the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE) in 2009. It suggests three preliminary

³³ Dietrich BONHOEFFER, *Sanctorum communio: Eine dogmatische Untersuchung zur Soziologie der Kirche* [1930] = *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke*, vol. 1, ed. by Joachim VON SOOSTEN, 2nd ed. (Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser/Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2005), 168.

³⁴ Cf. my proposals concerning the recursivity of word and sacrament in Henning THEIßEN, “Das kündlich große Geheimnis. Wort und Sakrament im evangelischen Gottesdienst”, in *PTH* 98 (2009), 173–186.

hermeneutical steps on the way to a Protestant ecclesiology in touch with the latest renewal processes in the churches. The first step is to focus the Protestant church concept on the Reformers' notion of discovering the hidden nature of the church within its worldly situation. The second step goes beyond the dogmatic fundamentals of the church by exploring different contexts (ethical, ecumenical etc.) in which that hidden church can be discovered. The third step is to consider worship as the heart of the church's life and at the same time as its most obvious contribution to life in public – a good starting-point for church renewal.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Dieser Aufsatz schlägt drei vorläufige hermeneutische Schritte auf dem Weg zu einer evangelischen Ekklesiologie vor, die in vollem Austausch mit den gegenwärtigen Reformentwicklungen in den Kirchen steht. Der erste Schritt rückt die reformatorische Lehre von der Verborgenheit der Kirche ins Zentrum des evangelischen Kirchenverständnisses. Der zweite Schritt verlässt das engere Gebiet der dogmatischen Ekklesiologie, um verschiedene (ethische, ökumenische usw.) Kontexte der Kirche als ekklesiologische Entdeckungszusammenhänge zu erschließen. Der dritte Schritt verbindet beide zu der Grundannahme, dass evangelische Kirchenreform vom Gottesdienst als Mittelpunkt kirchlichen Lebens, aber auch als zentraler Äußerung der Kirche im öffentlichen Leben ausgeht.