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# UNITY AND IDENTITY IN PERSPECTIVE OF THE FREE EVANGELICAL CHURCHES

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**ABSTRACT.** Free evangelical Churches emphasize unity amongst God's children. To put it in a nut-shell: The Founder of the first Free evangelical Church in Germany, Hermann Heinrich Grafe (1818–1869), performed an ecclesiological balancing act in order to make the unity of the children of God visible: he has founded a particular Church as an expression of the universal Church. The Free evangelical Churches came to life with a creed that preceded the ecumenical word of John 17:21. Their founders were aware of, that even a Protestant particular Church must continue to pursue the goal of reducing confessional egoism through prayer, personal encounters, common ministry, and serious theological discourses, and to discern the unity already existing in Christ "for the world to believe." This goal remains, even though the numerical growth and confessional fragmentation of the one Church of Jesus Christ over the last two centuries make the visualization of their unity seem impossible. This article shows ecumenical chances and obstacles of the free-evangelical perspective on unity and identity, which are somewhat typical for ecumenical dialogues between free Churches and other Churches.

**Keywords:** Unity, Identity, Free evangelical Churches, International Federation of Free evangelical Churches.

## The Free-evangelical perspective on unity and identity

Free evangelical Churches emphasize unity amongst God's children. To put it in a nutshell: The Founder of the first Free evangelical Church in Germany, Hermann Heinrich Grafe (1818–1869), performed an ecclesiological balancing act in order to make the unity of the children of God visible: he has founded a particular Church[1] as an expression of the universal Church.

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1 Cf. Kurt Seidel, "Freie evangelische Gemeinde im Spiegel ihrer biblischen Vorbilder," Vortrag vom 3. September 1995 in Haiger, ed. by Hessische Predigerkonferenz, 1996: 20.

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Hence, I would like to briefly indicate to you, how the relatively small Free evangelical Churches in Germany[2] have mastered this "balancing act" between unity and identity, or between universal and particulate Church.

The difficulty lies in expressing the unity of the Church as it is given in our Lord Jesus Christ, on the one hand, but also in the face of theological differences and different convictions, on the other hand.

If the Free Churches in Germany[3] are not perceived as some kind of "untimely abortion," or as merely threatening competitors alongside the traditional national Churches, but rather considered to be legitimate forms of being Church, then we have to focus on the reasons for their emergence[4], because

[2] The Federation of Free evangelical Churches (FeG) is one of the classic free Churches in Germany. At present, there are about 470 communities with about 40,000 members. There are about the same number of family members and friends. In the last decades, FeGs had a growing membership. Overall, the number of members and communities almost doubled in the period from 1960 to 2010. One reason for this is, that the FeG's mission society for Germany has made efforts to plant communities, especially in large cities. Despite this trend in growing, however, the number of members decreased in some regions and some communities had deceased. In the new federal states of Germany, where the FeG are hardly ever present, Church plantings succeed only in a few cases. The Federation of Free evangelical Churches is a member of the International Federation of Free evangelical Churches (IFFEC). In this international federation, national federations are organized from a total of 28 countries (from Europe, Asia, North and South America). IFFEC has around 450,000 members from 30 different countries. For the numbers see Markus Iff, "Die evangelischen Freikirchen," in *Handbuch der Ökumene und Konfessionskunde*, ed. by Johann-Adam-Möhler-Institut für Ökumenik, Paderborn, Bd. 1: Konfessionskunde (Leipzig/Paderborn: Bonifatius/Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2015), 325; Andreas Heiser, "Kirchliche Erneuerung am Beispiel der Freien evangelischen Gemeinden," *Review of Ecumenical Studies* 7 (2015): 45 and for the International Confederation of Protestant Protestant Churches: Johannes Demandt, ed., *Freie evangelische Gemeinden*, *Die Kirchen der Gegenwart* 4 = *Bensheimer Hefte* 114 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 2012).

[3] For the term and ecclesiastical figure, see Iff, "Freikirchen," 302; There are currently over half a million Christians in free Churches in Romania: Baptists, Pentecostals, Adventists, evangelical Christians and others. The largest Church is the Romanian Orthodox Church. 86.8% of Christians from Romania (19.8 million people) belong to this Church. The Roman Catholic Church (5%) has 1.16 million members, the Greek Catholics more than 700,000. The Reformed Church counts about 800,000 believers, the Lutheran Church 21,000, the Protestant Church A.B. 17,000. The Unitarian community has about 76,000 members, the Armenian Church 2,000; see World Council of Chruches, "Kirche und Ökumene in Rumänien," *https://www.oikoumene.org/de/resources/documents/commissions/faith-and-order/xi-week-of-prayer-for-christian-unity/2001/ecumenical-situation-in-romania*. The relationship between the Free Churches and the Romanian Orthodox Church is uneasy in many places. There are allegations of unfair courting of believers. Proselytism is also thought to be intentional, when some Churches use their material strength (which they owe to foreign partners), the support in form of grants or major construction projects as advertising for their own Church.

[4] Cf. Karl Heinz Voigt, "Freikirchen als Vorboten der Ökumene in Deutschland," *ThGspr* 33 (2009): 72.



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the formation of Free Churches was initially seen from the perspective of the mother Churches as a serious threat to the unity of the Church[5].

## 1. The situation of the Protestant Churches in Germany at the time of foundation the first Free evangelical Church

When surveying the situation of the Protestant Churches during the time of the formation of the Free evangelical Churches in the middle of the nineteenth century in Germany, it is clear that they arose within the context of the confessional Churches, which were organized as Churches of specific territories and which were considerably privileged.

### 1.1 The national Churches as confessional Churches

As denominational Churches that emerged from the Reformation, the creeds and confessions of the national Churches were considered to be of fundamental importance. Their confessions had, in addition to their theological function, also a political task. Since 1555 they formed a basis for the unity of the state. Simultaneously, however, they also establish a clear fence against false doctrine and against Churches that had no legitimate status within this state. And at the same time the expression of the right doctrine of these Confessions led to the feeling of superiority over other denominations and theologies[6].

### 1.2 The national Churches as territorial Churches

Due to their legal status, the individual national Churches were self-contained. They were territorial Churches and did not see the need to work with believers of other confessions and denominations, neither on a national level, nor on an international level. It follows that the mission to other states was mostly done by emigrants only. Mission was even rejected as interference in the domestic policy of the country. The other way around, the mission within its own borders was considered as an unwanted intrusion that had to be countered[7].

### 1.3 Privileged Churches

Generally speaking, the regional Churches were privileged entities with monopoly rights. There was no need for them to work together with other, non-

[5] Cf. Walter Fleischman-Bisten, Ulrich Möller, and Barbara Rudolph, eds., *Heilung der Erinnerungen*: *Freikirchen und Landeskirchen im 19. Jahrhundert. Beiträge aus einem Forschungsprojekt zum Reformationsjubiläum 2017*, *Beihefte zur Ökumenischen Rundschau* 120 (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlangsanstalt, 2018).
[6] Cf. Voigt, "Freikirchen," 78.
[7] Cf. Voigt, 78f.



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privileged denominations. According to the German Church historian Karl Heinz Voigt, the theological self-understanding, the dependence on the political government and the historically grown structure of the German territorial Church explain the ecumenical restraint that he perceives from the beginning until after 1945.

"In the context of the confessional, territorial and the provincial Church privileging Protestantism, the Free Churches not only sought a place with their other theological approach, but also transported ideas of the Anglo-Saxon covenant-theology to Germany and designed them in various ways. As a result, they are among the pioneers of inner-German ecumenism and its international connections."[8]

## 2. Steps between unity and identity

Given this context, the founding of a free Church is not at first immanent[9].

### 2.1 Hermann Heinrich Grafe

The origins of the Free evangelical Churches can be traced back to the life and work of the textile merchant Hermann Heinrich Grafe (1818–1869)[10]. He visited the "Eglise libre evangelique" on a business trip to Lyon in 1841. This Church was planted there in 1832 by the reformed pastor Adolphe Monod

[8] Voigt, 80.

[9] For the history of their founding under the aspect of Church renewal, see Heiser, "Erneuerung," (see note 2), 43–69.

[10] Biografies: Heinrich Neviandt, "Erinnerungen aus dem Leben des am 25. Dezember 1869 entschlafenen Kaufmannes Hermann Heinrich Grafe," in *Ein Act des Gewissens. Erinnerungen an Hermann Heinrich Grafe*, ed. by Wolfgang Dietrich, with the support of Erich Brenner et al., *Geschichte und Theologie der Freien evangelischen Gemeinden* 1 (Witten: Bundes-Verlag 1988), 99–284; Gustav Ischebeck, "Blätter aus vergangenen Tagen," *Der Gärtner* 27. Jg., no. 37/38 (22.9.1918): 162–28. Jg., no. 51 (21.12.1919): 300; Walther Hermes, *Hermann Heinrich Grafe und seine Zeit. Ein Lebens- und Zeitbild aus den Anfängen der westdeutschen Gemeinschaftsbewegung. Mit einem Anhang der Lieder und Gedichte Grafes* (Witten: Bundes-Verlag 1933); Richard Hoenen, *Die Freien evangelischen Gemeinden in Deutschland. Ihre Entstehung und Entwicklung* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1930); Wolfgang E. Heinrichs, *Freikirchen. Eine moderne Kirchenform. Entstehung und Entwicklung von fünf Freikirchen im Wuppertal*, *Monographien und Studienbücher* (Gießen and Wuppertal: Brunnen Verlag and R. Brockhaus Verlag, 1989; Wolfgang E. Heinrichs, "Hermann Heinrich Grafe und seine Zeit," in *Lebenszeichen. Die Tagebücher Hermann Heinrichs Grafes in Auszügen*, eds. Wilfrid Haubeck et al. (Wuppertal and Witten: R. Brockhaus Verlag and Bundes-Verlag, 2004), 13–26; Hartmut Weyel, *Zukunft braucht Herkunft. Lebendige Portraits aus der Geschichte und Vorgeschichte der Freien evangelischen Gemeinden*, *Geschichte und Theologie der Freien evangelischen Gemeinden* 5.5/1–3 (Witten: Stiftung Christliche Medien Bundes-Verlag, 2009–2011) (it offers biografical portraits to almost all free-evangelical personalities negotiated here); Hartmut Weyel, *Evangelisch und frei. Geschichte des Bundes Freier evangelischer Gemeinden in Deutschland*, *Geschichte und Theologie der Freien evangelischen Gemeinden* 5.6 (Witten: Stiftung Christliche Medien Bundes-Verlag, 2013), 18–37.



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(1802–1856). Monod went to Geneva for his theological studies and had contact there with the Scottish Congregationalist Robert Haldane (1746–1842) and his Free evangelical Church of Geneva (Eglise evangelique libre à Geneve).

This Church was founded in 1817 as part of the revivalist movement among theology students ("Reveil") and was strongly related with the theology of John Calvin and the Reformed confessions.

An interesting fact should be noted here: This model of the Church in Lyon, the "Eglise libre evangelique," was clearly characterized by a non-denominational character. Not only have believers from different denominations joined it, but it was also striking for its strong missionary commitment.

This contact had a double influence. On the one hand, Grafe was deeply influenced by this Church in his thoughts on the free grace of God as the center of the Christian message. On the other hand he noticed that the Lord's Supper should be a meal for believers only. The extension of the term "grace," by the attribute "free"-grace, corresponds to the idea of *sola gratia* insofar as it is intended to highlight the unconditionality of salvation *extra nos*, but *pro nobis*[11].

Hermann Heinrich Grafe thus found in Lyon an independent Protestant Church. In this Church one could become a member voluntary, which aligned with Grafe's perception of individualism and his conecpt of free will[12]. Furthermore, the community had a strong missionary impetus and a flat presbyterial hierarchy.

### 2.2 The Protestant Brotherhood Association

To find a new theological conviction does not automatically mean to plant a new Church. So, we have to look at the political circumstances, which catalyzed the further development to the formation of the Free Churches in Germany.

The political and social innovations took a rapid course around the middle of the nineteenth century. The middle classes expressed their claim to political co-determination. The poorer lower classes articulated the plight of pre-

[11] Grafe had come in contact with the term "free grace" in Wuppertal with Friedrich Wilhelm Krummacher (1796–1868). The theological content was further catalyzed in contact with the Reformed theology in Lyon. Grafe had often visited the services, in which the Reformed pastor and later preacher in Potsdam Friedrich Wilhelm Krummacher preached, see Weyel, *Evangelisch und frei*, 19; for Krummacher see Otto von Ranke, "Art. Krummacher, Friedrich Wilhelm," *Allgemeine Deutsche Bibliographie* 17 (Leipzig, 1883): 243–246 und Hermann-Peter Eberlein, "Album ministrorum der reformierten Gemeinde Elberfeld. Prediger und Pastoren seit 1552," *Schriftenreihe des Vereins für Rheinische Kirchengeschichte* 163 (Bonn: Verlag Dr. Rudolf Habelt 2003): 106–111.

[12] The voluntaristic aspects in the concept of faith is shown by Andreas Heiser, "*Personale Identität und Bildbarkeit der Person bei Hermann Heinrich Grafe*," in *Person, Identität und theologische Bildung*, eds. Andreas Heiser et al. (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2017), 67–97.



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industrial mass poverty, which had arisen from the end of the old social structure, that was based on the manorial and guild system[13]. This situation exploded with the revolution of 1848/1849. Hermann Heinrich Grafe experienced the riots up close, as an uprising broke loose in Elberfeld on May 9, 1849 in the middle of the "Reichsverfassungskampagne" (April to July 1849). Barricades were set up and riots broke loose against the rich citizenship. As in other cities[14], the uprising in Elberfeld was crushed by the Prussian military[15]. For Grafe the armed insurrection was the outcome of a morbid "Zeitgeist" (spirit of the time) and therefore had to be rejected as ungodly and reprehensible. Grafe refused the radical demand for liberal emancipation. "In that movement at that time," he said, as looking back, "I saw only bad things, and saw mostly good things, when I was looking back to the old times."[16]

[13] Cf. Lothar Gall, "Von der ständischen zur bürgerlichen Gesellschaft," in *Enzyklopädie Deutscher Geschichte* 25, 2., aktualisierte Auflage (München: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 2012), 89–97 and Alexis de Tocqueville, *Das Elend der Armut. Über den Pauperismus*, ed. by Manfred Füllsack and Michael Tillmann (Berlin: Avinus Verlag 2007).

[14] The revolution was defeated militarily in Vienna in October 1848. In Berlin, the counterrevolution intensified, but the meetings had been banned by the Prussian National Assembly on November 9, 1848. The Prussian King Frederick William IV. harshly rejected the imperial crown offered to him by the National Assembly, see Wolfgang E. Heinrichs, *Hermann Heinrich Grafe und seine Zeit*, in *Lebenszeichen*, eds. Haubeck et al., 18f.

[15] Cf. Klaus Goebel and Manfred Wichelhaus, eds., *Aufstand der Bürger. Die Revolution 1849 im westdeutschen Industriezentrum* (Wuppertal: Peter Hammer Verlag, 1974) and Wolfgang Dietrich, "Barrikaden. Heimatmission und Gemeindediakonie," in Wolfgang Dietrich (ed.), *Ein Act des Gewissens. Dokumente zur Frühgeschichte der Freien evangelischen Gemeinden*, with the support of Erich Brenner et al., *Geschichte und Theologie der Freien evangelischen Gemeinden* 2 (Witten: Bundes-Verlag, 1988), 11–54.

[16] "I saw only bad things in the movement of that time, and in the clinging to the old, mostly only good things." In the aftermath, a change took place in his political conception. He now preferred the democratic form of the monarchy. "And should I choose among the various forms of government, I would not hesitate to declare myself a republic, as best in itself; because it is most conducive to personal development, to the formation of capable characters, in that its use, if it is to be really fruitful for the good of the country, requires already characters which have arisen from the people and formed in it, then also make an impact upon the people in a popular manner and so much to spur it on to its own education." (Entry of 21 June 1852 [Diary 1, pp. 158–161]). – Democracy represents a precondition for the free-Church movement. But even at the end of the 19th century, even in Protestantism, it often served as a placeholder for an anarchy of values. Democracy and cultural degeneration were mentioned in the same breath. The Church historian Kurt Nowak states: "German Protestantism lost its former culture of dissent." He reasons this statement disillusioned: "After the pacification of the religious parties in the Augsburg Religious Peace by 1555 and in the Peace of Westphalia of 1648 Protestant knowledge of the necessity of dissent … was lost. The Protestant state was no more tolerant than the Catholic one." [Kurt Nowak, "Der lange Weg des deutschen Protestantismus in die Demokratie," in *Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte interdisziplinär. Beiträge 1984–2001*, by Kurt Nowak, *Konfession und Gesellschaft* 25 (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2002), 377].



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Under the impression of the revolution of 1848/1849, Grafe founded on 19 June 1850 in Wuppertal, in a center of the early industrialization and social upheavals, with like-minded brothers the "Evangelischen Brüderverein." He intended to elevate the self-alienated citizens and in order to achieve this result, there was only one goal for him: To spread the gospel of Jesus Christ for the salvation of sinners. Grafe had previously resigned from his function as a deacon in the reformed Church of Elberfeld. He was annoyed with the lack of discipline and without Church discipline – according to his understanding – no true apostolic-Protestant Church could exist[17].

In addition to the missionary proclamation of the Gospel, the members of the Evangelical Brothers' Association also celebrated the Lord's Supper together, as they did not want to sit "at the Lord's table" with people who were evidently not believers. Within this Protestant Brotherhood conflicts were soon evident[18].

### 2.3 The Planting of the first Free evangelical Church in Germany

On November 22, 1854, the "Free evangelical Church of Elberfeld and Barmen" was constituted. Grafe had previously drafted a Church constitution. The resignation from the regional Church and the formation of the new community meant for Grafe and the other participants an "act of conscience," as they formulated in their letter to the Church leaders on November 30, 1854. They mentioned the reasons for their action, namely that they question the basis of the Protestant Church, according to which "the unbeliever enjoys the same right on the basis of a mass-Confirmation."[19]

They resisted the assumption that they wanted to create a perfectionist Church. But, despite the imperfection, the body of Christ must be represented in such a way that the local Church should be an image of the universal, invisible Church of Jesus Christ, and only those who have heard the word and answered with faith should belong to it. And the faith should come to expression under the

[17] Dietrich (ed.), *Act* (see note 10), pp. 191f.; It was already stated in the Heidelberg Catechism of 1563, that those "who turn out in their confession and life to be unbelievers and godless" may not be allowed to partake of the sacrament, because "otherwise the covenant of God will be reviled and their anger will be aroused throughout the Church." (Question 82, in Evangelisch-Reformierte Kirche (Deutschland), ed., *Heidelberger Katechismus*, Revidierte Ausgabe (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1997), 54.

[18] Carl Brockhaus (1822–1899) was more committed to the exclusiveist doctrine of Darby, and there were differences regarding the baptismal doctrine between Grafe and the Baptist preacher Julius Köbner (1806–1884). See Erich Geldbach, "Darby/Darbysten," *TRE* 8 (Berlin and New York, 1981), 357–358; Rolf-Edgar Gerlach, *Carl Brockhaus – ein Leben für Gott und die Brüder* (Wuppertal, 1994); Ruth Baresel, *Julius Köbner – Sein Leben* (Kassel, 1930); Wolfgang E. Heinrichs, "Köbner, Julius Johannes Wilhelm," in *Biographisch-Bibliographisches Kirchenlexikon* 4 (Herzberg, 1992), 233–236.

[19] Dietrich, *Act* 2, (see note 15), 215.



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action of the Holy Spirit through a believer's lifestyle. In spite of leaving the Reformed Church of Elberfeld, they wanted to prove by action that they intended to maintain unity with all the members of the body of Christ.

The Geneva "Eglise libre evangelique" served as a model of building the new Chruch with name, constitution and creed[20].

The intention was that the newly formed congregation should be "evangelical," thus in accordance with the gospel in terms of the doctrine of justification and in its understanding of Church.

Hence, Grafe founded an independent congregation in opposition and in contrast to the Protestant territorial Church, the Baptist Church and the Darbysmus.

Even before the Church planting, Grafe strived for maintaining unity. So he tried to come to an agreement with the existing Baptist Church in Barmen on the formation of a common Church. But this failed on the baptismal question, since Grafe regarded his infant baptism as a valid baptism. And if one is bound in his conscience to his infant baptism, he should not be compelled to be baptized as an adult. But the Bapitists demanded an adult-baptism in order to become a member of their Church[21].

In contrast to the Darbymus or the "Christian Assembly," Grafe emphasized that in a Church, which is organized according to God's will, a constitution and offices (duties or service) were necessary[22]. He was convinced of the "divine appointment of the elders." In his opinion, this ministry culminated in all the ministries of which the New Testament speaks.

The Constitution of the first Free evangelical Church focused on the local congregation, which had to formulate the doctrine and regulate the conduct of people belonging to the common priesthood of the faithful in the execution of all important decisions.

The Elberfeld-Barmer creed was preceded by John 17 to anchor the unity of Christians in the unity of father and son[23]. The creed did not contain any "special doctrines" and should describe "only the undoubted guideline of the

[20] Dietrich, *Act* 2 (see note 15), 111–123; Wilfrid Haubeck, "Dokumentation 3: Gemeindegründung: Glaubensbekenntnis und Verfassung," in Dietrich, *Act 2,* 111–123; the reference Grafes to the Geneva-confession as a template for his own confession is based on the lower organizational level of the Bern or Lyon communities.

[21] See Andrea Strübind, "Warum die Wege sich trennten. Der Streit um das Taufverständnis in der Frühzeit des deutschen Baptismus und die Entstehung der Freien evangelischen Gemeinden," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Gemeinde* 12 (2007): 241–271.

[22] Diary entry of 2 April 1858 "Die Dienstverrichtungen in der Gemeinde." For the constitution, see Dietrich, *Act* 1 (see note 10), 209–213.

[23] Haubeck, "Dokumentation 3," in Dietrich, *Act* 2 (see note 15), 123.



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healthy biblical faith."[24] It served to legitimate the new Church against other Churches and authorities. It played no role in the further history of the Elberfeld congregation.

Even later congregations of the Federation of Free evangelical Churches acted with written creeds such as Grafe himself has done. Because of his understanding of unity, he demanded the reference to the Scriptures and not to exclusive creeds[25].

### 3. The Unity of the Body of Christ

Of course, we must ask ourselves, how a new Church planting, which separates itself from an existing Church, can represent the unity of the Church? The "Unity of the Children of God" was nowhere better demonstrated for Grafe than by the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Therefore, there were several guests at the Lord's Supper in the community of Elberfeld-Barmen. It was possible for believers who did not belong to the congregation to attend the Lord's Supper without having to formally leave their congregation.

### 3.1 The Federation of Free evangelical Churches

Since the beginning of the Free evangelical Church, an ecumenical openness for Christians from other Churches was an important factor. Grafe and the community also cultivated intense relationships with Christians from other denominations, which were represented in an Evangelical Alliance (EA), that was founded in London in 1846.

In 1874, 22 congregations merged together and formed the "Federation of the Free evangelical Churches and Lord's Supper Communities," the later "Federation of Free evangelical Churches," as it was called since 1928[26]. The purpose of this "conference" was: "The communion of the Lord's Supper, that is, communion to serve one another with the gifts received, to counsel, and to offer a helpful hands ... ."

[24] Haubeck, 114.

[25] However, Grafe overlooked the fact that Scripture and confession, even in the Reformed Church of his days, were not separate or even opposite figures, but were related to one another – with the prevalence of Scripture. An examination of the confessional hermeneutics of Grafe, who was able to misinterpret confessional texts as static and opposed them to the dynamics of the mind, is not yet available. Grafe differentiated between useful confessions, which were unifying (*Apostolicum*), and harmful confessions, which had a dividing effect.

[26] *100 Jahre Bund Freier evangelischer Gemeinden, Gründungsprotokoll*, Faksimile-Druck (no date given, Witten, 1974).



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It was not a matter of exercising domination. On the contrary, it was desired, "that the independence of the individual congregation should be preserved as far as it is possible."[27]

The "Guiding Principles" emphasized, on the one hand, that the purpose of the association was "to strengthen one's faith in the Lord Jesus and love all the children of God" and, on the other hand, to present the inner unity of the Spirit "outwardly."

This Federation of the Free evangelical Churches is an example of the integration of different theological positions. In the merging sacrament communities these were especially the question of how to practise baptism. In the covenant they came and stayed together[28].

### 3.2 Participation in federal initiatives

As the Free evangelical Churches longed for visible unity, they, therefore, were involved in founding confessional confederations. It was not just a matter of collaboration at the organizational level, but also of spiritual communion, prayer meetings, celebrating communal services, and missionary activities.

Thus, the Free evangelical Churches were founding members of the "Christian Singer-Covenant/Christlicher Sängerbund" in 1879, the "Free Church Sunday School-Covenant/Freikirchlicher Sonntagschulbund" in 1891, the "Covenant of Free Church Preachers/Bund freikirchlicher Prediger" in Berlin 1904, the formation of the "Main-Committee of Protestant Free Churches/ Hauptausschuss evangelischer Freikirchen" in 1916.

An important further step towards the practical unity of the Free Churches was the foundation of the "Association of Protestant Free Churches/ Vereinigung Evangelischer Freikirchen" in 1926. It took place as a reaction of the First World Conference of the Movement for Practical Christianity in Stockholm 1925. Today it comprises of twelve member Churches and two guest members[29].

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[27] *100 Jahre Bund Freier evangelischer Gemeinden, Gründungsprotokoll*, 4.

[28] Voigt, "Freikirchen," (see note 4), 76.

[29] See http://www.vef.de/mitgliedskirchen, last accessed: 30th October 2018. The Union of Protestant Free Churches (Verienigung evangelischer Freikirchen [VEF]) is a union of independent Churches, the oldest interdenominational and ecumenical association in Germany. The theological preamble adopted in 1998 describes a basic consensus, to which all the Churches and parish associations of the VEF agree. Unifying aspects are: the one Lord (Christ confession), the one Word (Bible as teaching authority), the personal faith, the Church of believers, the mission to mission and the hope of the coming Lord. The opening passage of the Preamble strikes out, that the VEF understands itself as a "community of evangelical congregations and Churches," "united by the Lord Jesus Christ." That is why the Free Churches claim: "… with all the Churches of the Reformation, they testify to the salvation of sinners for the sake of Jesus Christ's sake, out of God's free grace solely by faith." (VEF Charter, § 1: Self-conception, www.vef.de/fileadmin/download/VEF_Satzung.pdf); See Iff, "Freikirchen" (see note 3), 298f. and Klaus Peter Voß, "Die Vereinigung Evangelischer Freikirchen



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The Free evangelical Churches were also involved as guest members in the formation of the "Working Group of Christian Churches/Arbeitsgemeinschaft Christlicher Kirchen e.V." in Germany in 1948[30].

### 4. Perspectives

The Free evangelical Churches understand themselves as part of the worldwide Christ-communion[31] and their unity as founded in Jesus Christ. It is the goal of the Free evangelical Churches to present this unity within and beyond their own borders.

The German theologian Harding Meyer has seen the goal of ecumenical work as "promoting the fellowship of all who believe in Christ, the unity of Christians."[32]

Since even Free evangelical Churches are not content with establishing the unity of Christians in the invisible Church[33], they try to promote the visible community of believers[34]. They regard personal faith in Jesus Christ, obedience

auf dem Weg zur Kirchengemeinschaft," *Ökumenische Rundschau* 49 (2000), 79–92: Voss sees in the preamble of 1998 an important basis for further clarification-process of the member Churches of the VEF. The fact that they are still a long way from the ecumenical model of "unity in reconciled diversity" is shown in the problems with membership shifts. The preamble also serves as a basis for discussions with other Churches.

[30] Voigt, "Freikirchen," 82–90.

[31] Cf. the preamble to the Constitution of the Federation of Free evangelical Churches, adopted at the Bundestag of the Federation of Free evangelical Churches on September 21th, 2018 in Siegen-Geisweid.

[32] Harding Meyer, "Ökumenische Zielvorstellungen," *Bensheimer Hefte* 78 (Göttingen, 1996): 13.

[33] The distinction between "visible" and "invisible Church" (*ecclesia visiblisia* and *ecclesia invisibilis*) presumably goes back to Zwingli (Zwingli, *Fidei expositio*, 1531 [*Fidei expositio*, ed. by Fritz Büsser and Joachim Staedtke, in Emil Egli et al., eds., *Huldreich Zwinglis sämtliche Werke*, vol. 6.5, *Corpus Reformatorum* 93,5 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1991), 108–111]); see Albrecht Ritschl, *Ueber die Begriffe: sichtbare und unsichtbare Kirche,* in *Theologische Studien und Kritiken* 32 (Hamburg, 1859), 189–227 and in Albrecht Ritschl, *Gesammelte Aufsätze*, Freiburg im Breisgau and Leipzig: Mohr, 1893, (68–99) 68f.; see Wilfried Härle, "Kirche VII. dogmatisch," *TRE* 18 (Berlin and New York, 1989), 286f. To think about the two Churches fuels the misconception, that the true Church is a community existing as a mere idea. This was already stated by Melanchthon (Hans Engelland, ed., *Melanchthon's Werke* 2/2, (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1953), 474f.), that the Church was not a *Platonica civitas* (CA VII, 20 Apology [Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland ed., *Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche*, hg. im Gedenkjahr der Augsburgischen Konfession 1930 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, $^{9}$1982), 238, 17–22]). Luther himself therefore preferred to speak of the *ecclesia abscondita* (*De servo arbitrio*, 1525 [WA 18, p. 652,23]), bearing in mind that although the Church was invisible as a community of faith, it would certainly be recognizable by outward signs, where the Church was located in the World is to be found.

[34] Cf. Vereinigung Evangelischer Freikirchen, ed., *Freikirchenhandbuch. Informationen-Anschriften-Texte-Berichte*, Ausgabe 2004 (Wuppertal: R. Brockhaus, 2004), 32.



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to the Word and to God's will, as a precondition for community membership. This self-image is open to ecumenical partnership[35].

Free evangelical Churches see appropriate ways of cooperation, especially in the "Association of Protestant Free Churches (VEF)" and in the "Evangelical Alliance."

Concerning doctrine, they are trying to publicly acknowledge matches in order to signal unity, where it exists.

For example, the Free evangelical Churches have largely agreed on understanding the gospel with the Leuenberg Church-Community = Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE) in 2009[36].

The relationship to the World Council of Churches is distanced at the level of the "Federation of Free evangelical Churches," which is due to differences in ecclesiology and christology. In addition, Free evangelical Churches miss occasionally in some of the pronouncements of the World Council of Churches a clear orientation towards Jesus Christ and the Scriptures.

However, there are partnerships between individuals of the Ecumenical Council of Churches and Professors of the Ewersbach University of Applied Arts within the framework of research projects on ecumenism and knowledge about denominations.

The Free evangelical Churches have started with a creed into life, a creed that began with the ecumenical word of John 17:21. Its founders were aware, that even a Protestant particular Church must continue to pursue the goal of reducing confessional egoisms through prayer, personal encounters, common ministry, and serious theological discourses, and to make visible the unity already existing in Christ "for the sake of the world." This purpose remains, even though the numerical growth and denominational fragmentation of the one Church of Jesus Christ over the last two centuries make the visible representation of their unity seemingly impossible.

[35] See preamble to the Constitution of the Federation of Free evangelical Churches (see note 31).

[36] "We reaffirm the testimony of the Gospel in the Concord of Reformation Churches in Europe and agree with the common understanding of the gospel outlined in the Leuenberg Agreement (LK 6–13)." (II. Zum Verständnis des Evangeliums, 1. Grundsätze, 1.1 [Bundesleitung des Bundes Freier evangelischer Gemeinden, *Zum Verständnis des Evangeliums*, *FeG-Text Dezember* 2009 (Witten: Bundesleitung des Bundes Freier evangelischer Gemeinden, 2009), 3]).



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