



Evangelisch.  
Frei. Kirche.



**Bund Evangelisch-Freikirchlicher Gemeinden in Deutschland K.d.ö.R. (BEFG) / Union of  
Evangelical Free Churches in Germany (with the legal status of a public corporation)**

*Presentation at the Visit of the WCC delegation in Elstal,  
Saturday, 25 March 2023*

Thank you for the opportunity to introduce you to our Baptist Union at this meeting, which is very important for us. Our “Bund Evangelisch-Freikirchlicher Gemeinden in Deutschland” – in English “Union of Evangelical Free Churches in Germany” – is officially abbreviated as BEFG. The other Abbreviation “K.d.ö.R.” stands for “Körperschaft des öffentlichen Rechts”, and means that the Union is a body holding the legal status of a public corporation. In Germany nearly all churches are K.d.ö.R. They are officially recognized as non-governmental bodies under public law, which have public functions, are legally autonomous and act on their own authority. Since a part of the German Brethren Movement (open Darbysts or Plymouth Brethren) 1942 has joined the “Bund der Baptistengemeinden in Deutschland” (Union of Baptist Churches in Germany), the so originated united church uses the present name. The BEFG thus has not an exclusively Baptist character.

My further introduction is made up of three parts, as our schedule specifies.

### **1. Structure of the BEFG**

As all Baptist churches and Brethren congregations the BEFG has a congregational church order. Congregationalism means three things. At first, that each local church leads itself – under the Lordship of Jesus Christ, with the Bible as the ultimate norm for doctrine and life and according to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The highest human authority in every congregation is the plenary meeting of all members. This does not exclude but in fact includes that every congregation has office bearers. The members’ meeting elects from their midst elders and deacons as lay-persons on a voluntary basis. And it appoints ordained pastors and deacons (both men and women) from outside the congregation on a full-time basis. In our German Union ordination is a prerogative of the Union. The voluntary lay-persons and the ordained full-time workers together make up the leading committee of a local church. And the same principle is valid for the Union.

Congregational order means secondly, that each local church, which governs itself, is not a branch of a higher church and not subject to directives from others. It is rather independent of other local churches and of trans-local church authorities. Nevertheless, each local church is not a monad, but interdependent with other local churches and integrated into trans-local church structures. We as

Baptists affirm what the Faith and Order convergence text “The Church: Towards a Common Vision” says in its No. 31:

“Each local church contains within it the fullness of what it is to be the Church. It is wholly Church, but not the whole Church. Thus, the local church should not be seen in isolation from but in dynamic relation with other local churches.”

That is why Baptist churches since the beginnings have built conventions or unions of local congregations. These unions are voluntary associations taken as a gift of God to support local churches, to strengthen their unity with other local churches and to carry out projects they would not be able to implement on their own. As the highest authority of every local congregation is the plenary meeting of all members, the highest authority of the Union is the plenary meeting of the delegates from their member churches (Bundesrat; Union’s council). And just like the local congregations the Union has a joint leadership by full-time officers and honorary co-workers. The Union’s council elects 12 persons (ordained or not) and the group of Brethren congregations delegates one for the voluntary Governing Board (Präsidium). The Governing Board again elects from among its members the President, the highest representative of the Union. The Governing Board also employs the Executive Board (Bundesgeschäftsführung) comprising three full-time officers. One of these three is the General Secretary. Facilities and working areas of the BEFG are the Department of Mission, the Child-and-Youth-Department, the Department of Personnel and Congregation, a Lay Academy and Elstal Theological Seminary.

On both levels, the local congregation and the Union, congregationalism means thirdly, that every member may participate in the decision-making and that decisions are made by majority vote. This resembles to democracy as form of government, but is a special form of democracy, a churchly or spiritual democracy. As Jesus Christ is the head of the Church, the Church must discern the mind of Christ before voting. This discernment is the task of the whole congregation and of the whole Union’s council respectively. To find out what Jesus Christ wants in a specific situation, means to investigate the Holy Scriptures and to discuss what we find in them. Congregationalism means that the church (local, national, or international) acts as a bible-reading hermeneutic community. As the participants want to reach a consensus about what the Bible says and the situation demands, this process usually needs some time and patience. If finally, we have reached a consensus on what the Bible teaches us in a specific situation, then we are confident, that the Spirit will guide us into all the truth, as Jesus in John 16,13 has said.

## **2. Confession of the BEFG**

Some Baptist scholars have said, that Baptists belong to the “non-creedal churches”. But that is not completely correct. It is correct only, if one understands creeds as confessions of faith seen as coequal to the Bible and having the authority of a law on faith. This indeed is not the Baptist perspective on confessions of faith. A confession for us is not a document of divine revelation, but an expression of and a witness to the churches’ agreement in belief. Therefore, every confession is basically modifiable. As such, a confession of faith has indeed its place in Baptist unions. Baptists advocate the general

Protestant scriptural principle in its Calvinist form and accordingly do not reject flatly the traditional teaching of the church, but make it subordinate to Scripture. In their around 180-year history German-speaking Baptists have formulated three confessions, the most recent being from 1977 and called "Account of Faith". Part of the Account of Faith is the Apostles' Creed as an ecumenical confession. The Apostles' Creed is printed also in our hymnbook and from time to time jointly proclaimed in the Sunday services. The Nicene Creed is not well known to Baptist worshippers, except theologically educated persons. But Baptists have always affirmed, that God is triune, i. e. that the one God exist in three coequal persons, and that Jesus Christ is one person in two natures, truly God and truly man. So Baptist share with other churches the substance of the Trinitarian and the Christological dogma of the early church. And of course, we agree with the basis of the WCC as "a fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the scriptures and therefore seek to fulfil together their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit."

Since the "Account of Faith" is not a short and easy-to-read text, we offer some more concise formulations of our beliefs. So, we like to affirm the four *solī*, the four "alone", in which the message of the Reformation is concentrated: *Solus Christus*, "Christ alone", is our mediator to God and source of eternal salvation. *Sola gratia et sola fide*, "through the grace of God alone and alone by faith", we are justified before God, and we receive forgiveness of sin and eternal life neither due to merits nor to good works. *Sola scriptura*, "the Scriptures alone", are the source of saving truth and the norm of Christian faith and conduct, because the gospel of Jesus Christus our saviour is the centre of the scriptures. As we Baptists consider ourselves as successors of the Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, we stick to these four *solī* with strong conviction.

Our Reformation heritage can easily be seen also in the so called "Baptist Principles" or "Distinctives", a non-official but nevertheless instructive list of six doctrines and practises which most Baptists consider as typical Baptist. These six distinctives are:

1. The Bible as the written word of God and the sole norm and guideline for Christian doctrine and life.
2. The believers' church, that is, congregations of believing and Christ confessing persons, in which membership is not ascribed but voluntarily acquired. Such a church cannot persist except by mission and evangelism.
3. Believers' baptism, that is, baptism only for those who are instructed in the Christian faith and by own decision asked to be baptised. Baptism is administered by immersion in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.
4. Freedom of conscience and of belief as an innate right of every person in the world and therefore separation of state and church, of legislation and religion.
5. The priesthood of all believers, that means, that all Christians are equal before God and among themselves and that ordination confers not an ontological status but a function.
6. The independence of the local church and the interdependence with other local churches in a union.

### 3. Ecumenical networking and attitude of the BEFG

Baptists never claimed that they are the sole saving church. They always recognized that true believers belong to other churches too and that other churches also believe in the Holy Trinity and the saving grace of God. This is explicated of our Account of Faith in the section headed with “The One body of Christ and the Divided Churches”. We cited it in the Application Form Question 17. The father of the German Baptist movement and of many Baptist churches in other parts of the European continent, Johann Gerhard Oncken, participated at the founding assembly of the Evangelical Alliance 1846 in London as the only representative of free churches in Germany. The Evangelical Alliance can be regarded as an ecumenical organisation before the beginning of the ecumenical movement in the 20<sup>th</sup> century – a proto-ecumenical organization, if you like.

In 1926 the German Baptist Union has been one of four founding members of “Vereinigung evangelischer Freikirchen” (Association of Evangelical Free Churches), the oldest ecumenical association in Germany. Today this association has 15 member churches with 280.000 church members in total. Its current president is our General Secretary Christoph Stiba. In the rules of the association, it is said: “The members of the Vereinigung Evangelischer Freikirchen recognize each other as part of the one church of Christ and by their communion want to visibly express the intrinsic unity of this church. They commit themselves to deepen this fellowship by close collaboration. At the same time, they sincerely strive to better discover and to strengthen the commonalities with differently shaped churches.”

On 10 March 1948 our Union together with four other churches founded the Council of Christian Churches in Germany, which assumed the name “Arbeitsgemeinschaft christlicher Kirchen in Deutschland (ACK)”. Our Union is member also of the Conference of European Churches (CEC), founded 1959, to build bridges in Europe beyond the Iron curtain. We gave impulse for and participate in theological dialogues and institutional cooperation between the Communion of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE) and the European Baptist Federation (EBF) since 1999. And we hold conversations with the United Evangelical Lutheran Church in Germany, for the first time in the 1980s and currently since 2017. We very much welcomed the document “Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World”, which the WCC, the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the World Evangelical Alliance issued together in 2011. To familiarize our congregations with this ground-breaking document we published a book in 2015 with its German version and comments on it from a Baptist perspective.

Now I like to conclude my presentation with a quotation from the Mission statement (Leitbild) of our Union, where it is said: “We are developing the working and living together with other Christians and churches as exchange of gifts in give-and-take on various levels. In doing so we understand ourselves as part of the universal body of Christ.”

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