

Church Fellowship- The Position of the WELS and its Sister Churches

This study was made to show the doctrine of Church fellowship held by the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS). It was first distributed at the German Free Conference in Grebenhain, Hessen in August 2014. Many people wanted to know more about the situation in the WELS- sister churches, especially in Germany. Therefore, the original paper was completely rearranged and passages on the history of the two confessional Lutheran church bodies in Germany were added with a strong focus on the Evangelisch Lutherische Freikirche (ELFK), the sister synod of the WELS. The base of this study is always the official position of the different church bodies. Non- official statements and papers are always marked as not being official statements but they are sometimes used to describe developments inside the synods that are not yet reflected by their official position.

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A: An overview of German Lutheranism and its current situation:

Germany is the country of the Reformation. Luther lived and worked in Germany and most of the Lutheran reformers were Germans, too. Wittenberg, where the first center of Lutheranism was established by Luther himself and many followers is in the eastern part of modern Germany, south of Berlin. The Lutherans once dominated the state churches that grew in Germany after the Reformation. More than two thirds of the provinces of modern Germany followed the Lutheran Reformation. Saxony, Lower Saxony, Hesse, Württemberg and Prussia were converted to the teaching of the Reformation as early as 1530. But the great days of German Lutheranism are long ago. Today we still have six officially Lutheran state churches (Landeskirchen) but their teaching has very few in common with the teaching of Luther and the Reformation. Historical criticism has destroyed the faith together with extreme unionism. Both developments invaded the

Lutheran state churches around the mid of the eighteenth century. Another enemy of Lutheranism appeared on stage when the reformed King of Prussia violently created the Church of the Prussian Union in 1817-1830. More than two thirds of German Lutheranism virtually disappeared. The new church was more or less reformed in its teaching and disposed confessional Lutheran pastors and professors. The idea of the Union was adopted by many governments in the different German states. Most state churches adopted the Union of Lutheran and Reformed faith officially, others that still are Lutheran on the paper nevertheless practiced the idea of Union and none of these churches holds to the book of concord today. In 1973 all German state churches officially build up full communion with each other and took no care that there are Reformed, United or Lutheran by law. Today, even the basics of Christianity are thrown overboard by the state churches and their leaders. There are two other church bodies that stand in the Lutheran tradition: The Selbständige Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche (SELK) that is slightly more conservative than the state churches and the confessional Evangelisch-Lutherische Freikirche (ELFK) which is the most important stronghold of conservative Lutheranism in Germany. The SELK is widely open for ecumenical endeavors and higher criticism. The main doctrines of Christianity are more or less held by the SELK, but the term confessional should not be used to describe this church body although some confessional church bodies are in fellowship with the SELK such as LCMS, FELSISA (South Africa) and the LCC (Canada). On the other hand it is in fellowship with the Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche in Baden (ELKiB), a small and very liberal church body with roots in the confessional movement and over that, the SELK tried several times to join the LWF, but was hindered by the national committee of the LWF, because it was not in official fellowship with the German state churches. The current position of the SELK might be close to the ALC in the 1970s and 80s. The ELFK has its roots in the confessional movement in Saxony in the 19th century. Today it is the last remaining Lutheran church body in Germany holding to the old Lutheran doctrines like biblical inerrancy.

B: As a result of the Prussian Union, many confessional Lutherans joined together to separate church bodies. The first such church body was the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Prussia, usually known as the Old Lutheran Church. This Synod was established in the 1840s in Prussia. Due to its strict central government it was able to withstand the measures of the Prussian government to destroy it and it grew to a large Synod with over 60.000 members and 120 congregations just before WWII. The main character traits of this Synod were its central structure and the fact that they cared about the Lutheran confessions as binding documents. The care for Lutheran worship was also very strong. This church was however not the revival of the church of the reformation. Many things were seen as open questions as long as they were not treated directly in the Confessions and their position on election was always weak. These problems in doctrine grew bigger and bigger, when WWII and the formation of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) brought a strong movement for unity among the more conservative Lutherans in Germany.

The other important synod, the Evangelical Lutheran Free Church (ELFK) was established in 1876 in Saxony, where an officially Lutheran state church was highly influenced by rationalism. Out of the confessional movement, the Free Church, as it is generally known appeared as a revival of the Lutheran Reformation. Strong ties with the LCMS strengthened the confessional position of this small church body. In other provinces there were similar movements, leading to small church bodies, too, but their position was almost everywhere similar to the "moderate" Old Lutherans.

WWII brought the loss of over one third of Germany's territory and old Lutheran countries like Silesia, Pomerania and the original Prussia. Shortly after the war, the state churches found themselves together in the EKD, a very liberal community, where the resistance of the more conservative state churches such as the Church of Schaumburg-Lippe in the center of Germany ceased. This led to a strong feeling of unity among the confessional Lutherans. This movement was strongest among the Old Lutherans, who severed their fellowship with the formally Lutheran state churches, that was never questioned before and with the help of the LCMS, they officially made a quick turn toward confessional Lutheranism, but this was half-hearted from the beginning. Nevertheless, the Free Church (ELFK) and the Old Lutherans declared fellowship in 1948. In 1972 they formed a united church body in Western Germany, the Selbständige Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche

(SELK). This was a severe blow for confessional Lutheranism in Germany, because the new church body adopted the liberal, or as they called it “moderate” position of the Old Lutherans. Today the SELK still exists with around 150 congregations and 30,000 members. Their seminary is located in Oberursel near Frankfurt. This seminary has more or less adopted all errors of modernism and liberalism, although the official position of this church is sometimes different. Historical criticism is the SELK’s official approach to scripture[1] and they work together with all sorts of churches in ecumenical endeavors. Common services with the state churches are frequently held in nearly all the congregations and closed communion virtually disappeared in the 1980s. The LCMS is officially in fellowship with the SELK, although the voices that want to break the fellowship with the SELK became louder in the LCMS in the last years.

The things were different in Eastern Germany for it was separated by the iron curtain. Here the Free Church and the eastern part of the Old Lutherans were still two separate church bodies, but they were in full fellowship since the declaration of 1948. The Free Church in the east saw the errors of the Old Lutherans already in the 1960s but they did not sever the fellowship until 1984/89. The Free Church was always more conservative than the Old Lutherans, but unionism took its root there too, so the damages were great when the fellowship broke in 1989. Two thirds of the members were lost in the struggle that lasted for more than 20 years[2] and the Free Church seems still quite divided. There is also still a difference between the official position[3] and what is really taught. Prayer is generally not regarded as a sort of fellowship. The WELS had fellowship with the ELFK since the beginnings in 1876, but it was never practiced since the break with Missouri in 1961, for the Free Church stayed in fellowship with Missouri. In 1993, the Free Church and the WELS reestablished their fellowship on an official scale. Since the same year, the ELFK is member of the CELC. Unfortunately, the Free Church did not come back to its former position in all points, although they tried to regain their historical doctrine that they once held. The doctrine of fellowship is the main thing that separates us from them.

The position of ELFK and WELS on fellowship:

The main aim of this study is to show the doctrine of both church bodies on fellowship. Therefore, the official documents of the WELS have to be considered. The things are sometimes different, when we look on the ELFK. Here, one must take the history of this church body into account, especially the time between 1972 when the different free Lutheran churches in the West merged to the SELK and 1992 when the ELFK finally severed all its ties with its former sister churches. One will easily recognize, that, although the error of both the SELK and their partners in the East had been clearly recognized in 1977 (more on this date later), the fellowship was not terminated until 1989. The official reasons and the Synod’s explanation of the ELFK will be examined, too.

C1: Persistent errorists- Study of the term and its meaning:

The dissolution of an existing fellowship when an individual, a group or a church body teaches contrary to scripture is the most important point of this study for it reveals most clearly the doctrinal problems of the WELS. The WELS teaches that fellowship should be suspended when the error in a church body or a group has the following characteristic traits:

- being persistent (only “persistent errorists” are to avoid)
- recognition is demanded
- propaganda is made for the error

(quoted from the 1970 print of *Doctrinal Statements- Essay on Church fellowship*)

The Free Church adopted this doctrine generally, but it lists only persistent adherence to false doctrine as a causing factor for a break of fellowship.[4] The other points are just mentioned in the WELS's paper on fellowship. We have to note the *and* in connection with the last point (*and make propaganda for it*).

We have to ask if the error and its appearance themselves are not enough to suspend an existing fellowship or to deny fellowship for every false doctrine is a great danger fall all the believers and for the whole congregation or church body. The passages in scripture that deal with the event of upcoming error never tell us the additional factors that are mentioned above.

The next question that arises is if such a judgment, whether the error is persistent is possible and further it is uncertain who should make this decision. If we follow the statement of the WELS word by word it is nearly impossible to say when a break should take place. One should be very careful in using the word *persistent* when it comes to false teachers. It is in the nature of things that some false teachers appear worse than others to us. So would we regard someone who denies the virgin birth as worse than someone who teaches incorrectly of good and bad angels. But our opinion should never be regarded as the instrument to measure the degree or the wickedness of an error. This is neither helpful when we make distinctions because we think for example of someone teaching wrongly out of his own will or wicked pleasure or if we would think that he does it out of a false tradition. In the end both are false teachers that have to be avoided according to scripture (Rom 16:17). The Bible does not make the distinctions that are mentioned above. Every false teaching is dangerous, for it infects the whole lump (Gal 5:9). Only when it is excluded, it can do no harm to the believers, if it is not excluded, it can grow and can cause every possible damage until Christian faith will be lost. Many church bodies give us striking examples of the growth of error that in the end destroyed the saving faith of many people.

The doctrinal statements of the WELS show us a way that we cannot go, for it is based on a more or less subjective judgment that is always uncertain and has no base in scripture. Additionally, this judgment is perverted by our sinful nature and it would get always into conflict with the principles of the Bible. The church has historically never distinguished between *persistent* errorists and *other* errorists.

C2: *Weak brothers and persistent errorists*- What does the Bible say?

There are various passages in the WELS statements, where one could read that weakness in faith is no reason for suspending fellowship. In the context of the foregoing points, this is very misleading. Regarding the book: *Church fellowship* by J.F. Brug, even more questions come up. In the chapter Weak brothers versus persistent errorists, Brug tries to explain that there would be a decisive difference between the two groups that would be relevant for fellowship issues. Brug comes to the conclusion that a judgment has to be made whether the error is persistent or if we deal with weak brothers. This is close to making any decision on the base of an open confession of a group or church body impossible.

Brug writes about admonition and the confutation of such admonition up to the direct opposition to the admonition. But who would ever say officially that he would not listen to admonition? All unionists have in

common that they always pretend to listen and they would seldom confess openly that they would oppose certain opinions directly. They always breathe the air of compromise and indifference. The best example is modern ecumenism, the complete deviation from the word of God to allow any sort of man-made doctrine as long as there is outward unity that is maybe the greatest danger for the Church of our Lord and Savior in our days.

The WELS paper will let the judgment decide, whether we think that admonition will succeed in bring the opponents back to the truth. When this question has to be answered with no, then the time has come to suspend the fellowship. The same problems occur when someone wants to decide who is a weak brother and who is a persistent errorist.

The decisive passages, Romans 16 and 2 John do not include admonition at all and no commandment to make the described judgment can be found.

Rom 16:17: Now I beseech you brethren...

Finally, it is impossible for us to make a solid judgment about errorists and if admonition is in vain or not. We cannot simply present admonition as a principle in the case of doctrinal struggle for the scripture do not tell us to do so. Eo ipso, admonition is not the ground on which we should make up our minds in doctrinal controversies. We are to look on the open confession that a group or a church body makes according to 1 John 4. The ELFK official always held the opinion that there can be different positions on the judgment when admonition cannot lead to further results.

In the time when one is in the period of admonition according to Brug's outlined procedure, the error can grow and cause heavy damage in a church body. The history shows that according to that concept this period can last for many years in which the leaven can grow. People who are infected by disease are put into separation. This is not only done when we think that the disease is highly dangerous. It is also done to stop the disease from spreading. We should also speak of our duty of confessing the truth by our separation, both to the true believers and to the false teachers to take a stand against their false doctrine.

The ELFK has constructed even other limitations for the suspension of fellowship. They usually state that there are doctrinal differences that although taught decisively in the Bible, would not fall under false doctrine. Here another judgment would be needed: Is the error (or "different opinion) church-splitting (*kirchentrennend*) or not.[5] One would not regard these as open questions in the general sense of the word, but practically the two terms are very close to each other. This has been a second limitation that was and is still taught by the ELFK. In the more liberal German Churches like the SELK, the term *kirchentrennend* is widely used, mainly for questions that are not decided in the CA, which are generally regarded as open questions there. The ELFK has always limited the term to fields like prayer fellowship, cooperation on the level of education (seminary and school where people from other denominations teach) and some other things.

C 3: Fellowship besides doctrinal difference:

This may be the most important point when we look on the history of the Free Church. We have seen that the doctrine of both, the WELS and the ELFK leaves room for fellowship although there is a doctrinal difference. The actions of the ELFK that led to the delay of breaking such a fellowship match with the pattern that the doctrinal statements of the WELS present us. One has to consider that the president of the ELFK[6], Gerhard Wilde, was educated at the seminary in Mequon, WI in the early 1960s. One cannot overestimate the influence of him and his men in the decisive period. He learned the doctrine of fellowship of the WELS and later practiced this doctrine when the struggle with the SELK erupted. This led on the one hand to a growing feeling of responsibility among the pastors of the ELFK for the need of doctrinal unity inside a fellowship, but on the other hand it caused a long delay of a break that, if we would only judge the open confession of the SELK and the Old Lutherans was urgent already in the 1970s. The fellowship was however not suspended. The open confessions and actions of the SELK, the suspension of conservative pastors in the SELK against the will of the congregations and many further actions to support the liberal position of the new church body were not enough. Things were regarded in a different light when in 1977, Gottfried Rost, the leading theologian of the East- German branch of the SELK, openly denied the communication of the attributes in the person of Christ.[7] This biblical doctrine that was explained thoroughly in the Confessions did not fit into Rost's rationalist system of doctrine, which could be characterized as mixture of ordinary modernism and Nestorianism, together with all sorts of other errors that would smash the frame of this essay. This led to a controversy between ELFK on one side and the Old Lutherans and SELK on the other side. When it became clear that both, the Old Lutherans and the SELK supported or at least tolerated Rost's views, the break seemed inevitable, but did not find enough supporters among the ELFK. The fellowship remained in the status quo. Liberal pastors[8] of the Old Lutherans continued to serve ELFK- congregations, so modernism could continue to grow inside the Free Church. The leading conservatives of the ELFK, among them Gottfried Wachler, the leader of the conservatives inside the Free Church and Gotthilf Doepler, pastor in the Thuringian diaspora of the ELFK, began to question the course of the synod. They asked for a break with both the SELK and its affiliated synod in the East, the Old Lutherans. President Wilde and many others were however, not willing to break with them immediately. They wanted more discussions and believed that the SELK would change the mind and would come to a more conservative position. But unrest grew among the Pastors and congregations of the ELFK, and in 1982, when new discussions did not have brought any results, the break seemed to be the logical step, it was once more delayed until 1984, when there was a small majority among the convention's delegates for a break with the Old Lutherans. The fellowship with the SELK remained active, however. Meetings with the SELK had shown that they have departed from the biblical doctrine, both on the field of fellowship (unionism/ ecumenism) and concerning the role and the inspiration of scripture (historical criticism). The break was delayed until 1989. One cannot really estimate the damages of this delay. The liberal doctrines taught by the Old Lutheran and SELK pastors led to huge losses of members, both congregations and individuals on the side of the Free Church. Especially those congregations that were distant from the ELFK's center in the Zwickau area[9] had great problems. The ELFK's congregations in Dresden, Leipzig, Luckenwalde (near Berlin) with some 500 members leave the ELFK immediately and join the SELK in 1991 after the wall came down together with the Old Lutherans in the East. Many individuals got lost. Many laypeople still do not understand the differences and some still practice fellowship with the SELK.

It is strange that the open differences were not enough for the break. Only the conviction that admonition would not lead to any results made it possible for the Free Church to delay the break that, based on the different positions and open statements seemed inevitable already in the late 1970s. Similar things can be found in the official statements of the WELS. The general distinction between weak brothers and errorists leaves room for fellowship besides doctrinal difference. Even if this status of fellowship may be limited to a certain period of time, this is against the biblical doctrine in this point. Scripture leaves no room for fellowship without the base of doctrinal agreement.[10] We have to take to open confession of a church body or a group into account, not our assumptions that they might believe different things. The Apostle John admonishes us (1 John 4:1-3):... The Apostle teaches us to look on the confession that people make. It is decisive, what is really taught and confessed and which actions flow out of this belief. But it is not decisive, how we as individuals see the others.

The distinction between errorists and weak brothers is neither a biblical means in doctrinal struggle nor a possible measure for us as sinful humans. We cannot read what is inside the hearts, so we are bound by the scriptures to judge the open confessions in the light of the bible. There are no blessings on such a human judgment that wants to look into the hearts and therefore such a judgment cannot be the base of fellowship. Similar things happen when one remains in a protesting fellowship. The fellowship is in its nature already broken by doctrinal disagreement and it should be terminated. Protesting fellowship is no measure for the church to deal with error in a church body. When we would leave the solid ground of scripture and go other ways, it is hard to find a clear path at all. It is obvious that with God's help many things that characterize biblical doctrine are still alive in those churches that adhere to the WELS' doctrine of fellowship. But we cannot speak of doctrinal agreement because the doctrine of fellowship that is presented in the foregoing passages divides us.

It is remarkable that the establishment as well as the dissolution of fellowship are seen separated from the open confession of a group or church body. The ELFK built up fellowship with the Old Lutherans and more than two thirds of the congregations merged with them to found the SELK in 1972 although doctrinal differences were obvious. The ELFK was not able to sever the fellowship with the two named liberal church bodies but after a struggle that lasted for decades. This is the danger of the leaven that Paul warns us of in Galatians 5. A clear course that takes care of all that the Bible teaches us cannot be found when the open confession of unity in true doctrine is replaced as the base for fellowship by a human judgment.

4. Financial cooperation:

The WELS teaches that financial cooperation is no part of church fellowship and state accordingly that financial support of other church bodies and spending money on such inter-church programs is possible. They practice these views widely in the Thrivent Financial for Lutherans. This is a (according to its self-presentation) confessional society which collects money from different church bodies by selling insurance papers and investment papers. The members receive in return money from Thrivent. One has to be member to make business with Thrivent. Other members of this society are the ELCA which is situated at the very borderline of Lutheranism and Christianity, the liberal LCMS and the more conservative WELS. All these church bodies receive huge amounts of money from Thrivent. The other side of Thrivent is the support of sinful actions like abortion and financial help for dangerous movements inside the church bodies. The ELFK has not directly been involved in such endeavors, because there is no such society as Thrivent in Germany. There are other, church related business corporations in which the ELFK is involved, but those have not the same binding characteristics as Thrivent has, for they require no direct membership for business-deals.

We know what Paul writes in 2nd Corinthians about the great spiritual meaning of offering money for Christian brothers. Nowhere would he regard this as standing outside fellowship. The Apostle always explains the spiritual meaning that lies beyond the ordinary spending of money. Nowhere in scripture is this regarded as an ordinary business-deal. The Lutheran Church can therefore not tolerate such sorts of financial cooperation.

This is meant to be a short overview. This is the reason why not all the points are regarded in all details to make the whole issue more comprehensive. For a detailed study on fellowship, it is necessary to study the booklet *Concerning Church Fellowship (CCF)* made by the Board of Doctrine of the CLC.

[1]The SELK's official paper on scripture clearly speaks in favor of the use of the historical- critical method of Bible interpretation. It is part of the series "Lutherische Orientierung" as number 10 under the title *Biblische Hermeneutik* (Oberursel 2011). The current bishop Hans Jörg Voigt denied the creation in six days in his article on creation in the official magazine of the SELK "Lutherische Kirche" (Vol. 4, 2012). Further examples of the liberal doctrine on scripture can be found in nearly every statement both of the SELK and of the Oberursel Seminary.

[2]The ELFK listed 24 congregations and more than 3300 baptized members in 1984, now there are 15 congregations with 1200 members (Synodalberichte der ELFK).

[3]The only official statements concerning doctrine are the Catechism *Was wir glauben* (adopted in 2002) and the *Statements of Unity* (*Einigungssätze*), that were made together with LCMS and Old Lutheran delegates just after WWII. The ELFK additionally adopted the doctrinal statements of the WELS as their official position.

[4]*Was wir glauben*, p. 142.

[5]The *Einigungssätze* show clearly that this kind of doctrine was and is still accepted by the ELFK (ES-Artikel: Kirchengemeinschaft).

[6]Gerhard Wilde, President of the ELFK 1978-2002.

[7]Chronik der ELFK, 1977.

[8]The pastors of the Old Lutherans /SELK have to be generally called liberal. Today there are for example only 2 pastors in the SELK who openly confess biblical inerrancy.

[9]Today this region south of Leipzig in the very south- west of Saxony is still the center of the Free Church. About 70 percent of the members live in Zwickau (~ 100,000 inhabitants) and surrounding villages.

[10]Rom 16,17, 2 John 11 and other passages.