

Evangelicals In Central Europe

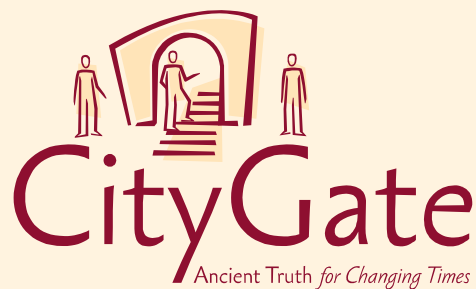
A Case Study From Slovakia

A survey and analysis of what issues Evangelicals face,
what they believe and prospects for the future.

A CityGate Field Study

Written by

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**CITYGATE EXISTS TO STRENGTHEN THE CHURCH BY HELPING PEOPLE
TO BRIDGE THE GAP BETWEEN THE REALITY OF CHRIST AND EVERYDAY LIFE**

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Edited by

Marsh Moyle

This is the first edition of this paper. We would like to thank all who shared their experiences and helped us with their insight. We would appreciate all your comments and critique. They might help us to fill the gaps we left out, and correct our unintended mistakes.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Why Research?

1.1.1. Needed for our own work

The aim of Združenie CityGate is to demonstrate the meaning and values of historic biblical Christianity in Central European cultures, and help others to do so¹. We do this by running the CityGate Study Centre in Bratislava, providing seminars, conferences, longer-term study programs, as well as facilities for individual studies, and by working with Christian publishing houses in Central and Eastern Europe. In order to do this effectively, to meet real needs, we try to understand the real situation in the Church², as well as the context of current culture and society. This helps us, and the publishers with whom we work, decide what books to publish. It also helps us choose the topics of seminars and conferences in the CityGate Study Centre. We would like to meet real needs of Christians in Central and Eastern Europe.

1.1.2. Need to know the context of the church

In all our research and studies, we have three important aims:

1. To know God. We believe that knowing God is not only the most fascinating intellectual activity in this world, it is also a joyful and awesome experience for an individual as well as a community. “*It is a subject so vast, that all our thoughts are lost in its immensity; so deep that our pride is drowned in its infinity.*”, said C.H. Spurgeon³. We believe that knowing God and worshipping Him has been the main calling of the Church since the beginning of her existence until our times.
2. To know ourselves. We see understanding one’s own strengths and weaknesses and the complexities of personal relationships in the light of biblical revelation as especially important in our times. Dealing honestly with guilt, anger, and pain should be a vital part of the healing ministry of the Church and in the Church.
3. To know our times. It is our conviction that Christians should not try to escape from the complicated world in which they are living because God is sovereign over all areas of His world. They should try to perceive its created beauty and understand its devastating brokenness caused by rebellion against a loving Creator. Understanding the culture and history, understanding the burning issues of public life, and trying to find solutions based on the values and principles of historic biblical Christianity is an important part of spreading the Kingdom of God in our time.

We understand these three areas as three imperatives of historic biblical Christianity.

Historic, because it is based on God’s acts in human history, especially His own entry into the historic and physical realm in Jesus Christ. History is created and sustained by God and in

¹ For more information about CityGate see the last page of this paper.

² If not specified otherwise, by “Church” we mean the universal community of Christians. We do not mean any particular denomination or local church

³ Quoted in J.I. Packer: *Knowing God*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, England, 1975, p. 13.

Him has its purpose and meaning. We also appreciate the richness of the history of the Church as a source of experience and wisdom.

Biblical, because we consider Bible to be the authoritative source of knowledge about God, the authoritative self-revelation of God and the final guide and governance for life.

1.1.3. To help to stimulate discussion in the Church and society

We aim to stimulate constructive and creative discussion by our research papers. These papers should be understood as an introduction to such discussion. They primarily aim to raise questions. Some questions deal with recognised burning issues, others survey areas about which people, for various reasons, do not talk. Our goal in these discussions is to help the Church progress and grow.

1.2. Why Do We Do Research About Evangelicals in Slovakia?

1.2.1. We live and work in Slovakia

What is the situation of the Church in Central Europe?

What are her main needs?

What do evangelicals talk about?

What are their hopes, fears, anxieties. What are their strengths and weaknesses?

What is the realistic potential of the Church in Slovakia in the next 10 years?

We have tried to find answers to these questions since we started our work in Slovakia in 1992. It has not been easy. Living and working in Bratislava, we were involved too much in the life of a local church to give an objective assessment and we did not have enough information to get a broader picture about the situation in the whole country. We were at the same time too far and too close. That is why we decided to do the research project resulting in this research paper.

1.2.2. Slovakia as a model

We chose Slovakia not only because we live here. Slovakia, thanks to its history, culture and geographic location is a good model, a sample of the broader Central European situation. Slovakia was part of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and the Czechoslovak Republic and as such was a part of their cultural and spiritual movements. Slovakia shared, along with other countries in the region, the experience of fascism and communism. German, Russian and Polish influences were also significant. It is not surprising to see similar development in evangelical communities in Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Poland and the southern Slavic countries⁴. The history, size and significance of evangelical⁵ denominations in these countries are comparable too.

Slovakia then could be a model. Most of what we observed in Slovakia would not be very different in the case of her postcommunist neighbours.

1.2.3. The practical problems of working in the current evangelical community

Návrat Domov, an evangelical publishing house operating in the Czech Republic and Porta libri, a publishing house operating in Slovakia, sells only 20% of all its books in evangelical churches, compared with 40% in Roman Catholic bookshops and churches and 40% in secular bookshops. Most

⁴ For a detailed analysis and good model of evangelical church and mission in former Yugoslavia see: *Mission Financial Practices in former Yugoslavia*, CityGate Research Paper, Mission Forum, 1988, Austria, available from CityGate, Bratislava.

⁵ For a working definition of “evangelicalism” and “evangelicals”, see Appendix 5.1, *Who Are Evangelicals*

of these books are written by evangelical authors and are written for an evangelical audience, but only 1 in 5 is read by an evangelical. Why do evangelicals not read more?

One does not need to make a complicated survey to find out some of the issues evangelicals are struggling with:

- a general sense of directionlessness,
- struggles with identity,
- a decline in church membership in spite of anticipated growth,
- ineffective evangelism,
- generational conflict in the Church,
- loss of active commitment

They are symptoms of something deeper and more profound. In this research project we tried to understand what is behind these tendencies, what is under the surface.

1.2.4. Our research method

We talked with over 40 pastors and laymen from various evangelical denominations. We talked about theology, church, literature, involvement in public life and history. Without the openness and honesty of these outstanding people we would not have been able to make any valid observations or draw any conclusions.

Together with a group of 11 students of Theological Mission Seminary (TMS) in Banská Bystrica we carried out a series of another 43 interviews with the more general evangelical public. The help of the TMS students and the generous attitude of their teachers was invaluable.

Another valuable source of information was provided by informal meetings with thoughtful non-Christians. We wanted to know how they perceive the Church and Christianity in general.

Besides the interviews we attended various church meetings and discussions, and we read whatever evangelical publications we had access to. This gave us the other, more public side of the story.

Any misunderstood observations, wrong conclusions, or misrepresented facts that might be an unintended part of this paper are, of course, the sole responsibility of the authors, not of those interviewed during the survey.

Without pretending to know all the answers to the difficult questions which confront evangelicals in this country we want to share some observations made on the way to finding them.

This project has not been a scientific enterprise for us. We are not historians analysing a detached period of history, neither are we sociologists trying to understand the mechanisms of society without being part of it. We are evangelical Christians deeply involved in what we are researching. The struggles of the evangelical community in this country are our own struggles. We are deeply convinced that the evangelical 'way' of spiritual life, theology, or social involvement has good roots in the Bible as the supreme authority of God's revelation to men, and is an expression of the 'catholic faith' of the Apostles, Church Fathers, Reformers, and of humble, godly men and women throughout the history of the Church.

Juraj Kušnierik
Bratislava, December 1996

2. History - Where Do We Come From?

2.1. Why Study History?

Yesterday was August 21, 1996, 28 years since the invasion of Soviet troops into Czechoslovakia in 1968. On this date, during the communist rule, my father used to tell me how it all happened. Then I would go to our cellar where we had a box full of newspapers from August, 1968. With great excitement I read them every year. My own memory was limited to a picture of Russian tanks in the streets of Banská Bystrica (I was four years old). Several years later, during my military service, it was the only day in the year when we were under the highest alert status. It was one of the most important days in our modern history.

Yesterday I watched the TV news. They asked some teenagers on the street of what this date (August 21) reminds them. Three out of four could not associate with it anything significant. They remembered only after the year (1968) was added to the date. One girl, after being asked what were the consequences of the invasion, said:

“It had no consequences for me. I was born 10 years later.”

This girl assumed that whatever happened before she was born does not really matter. She was, of course, wrong. If she would like to understand why her parents do not like to speak Russian, why they are so sceptical about any idealism, why they tend to say that we are always victims of the power games of superpowers, she would have to learn something about the world they lived in. She would also probably find out that at least some understanding of what happened before she came into this world might help her to understand her own world.

An understanding of history is important to understanding the present situation

This statement may be applied to the situation of the Church. Understanding the history of the Church is important for our understanding of the present situation of the Church. But why exactly is this understanding so important?

- *It helps us to understand the assumptions and expectations of the Church.* The historic context of the Church in each particular period of history has consequences for many generations. One example could be the influence of Enlightenment, the Age of Reason, on the Church, which led to two extreme positions - rationalism and subjectivism. They survived the Enlightenment and have become marks of substantial streams of evangelicalism up to our times⁶. Another example could be the Church's forced retreat to the privacy of homes and church buildings under communism. Its consequences are still felt seven years after the forces that caused it no longer exist⁷. It would be very difficult to understand many current assumptions and expectations of the Church, without some understanding of the issues it had to deal with in the past.
- *It broadens our understanding and appreciation of each other.* Realising that our history shapes our attitudes and assumptions, as well as our fears and expectations should help us in our appreciation of each other. Although generational misunderstandings are probably unavoidable in any community, a respect for the 'history' of the other (older or younger) generation would ease a lot of pain. A broadened mutual understanding might bring about much needed reconciliation in our churches. I experienced this during the research for this

⁶ The Enlightenment and Modernity had a significant impact on all Christian confessions. Its impact was especially strong in the case of American evangelical churches, since these were still in their formative stage in the high time of Modernity in the 19th century. For a detailed study of Christianity and Modernity see for example Jaroslav Pelikan: *The Christian Tradition, A History of the Development of Doctrine, Volume 5, Christian Doctrine and Modern Culture*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1989

⁷ For a detailed description of the impact of communism on the way people in postcommunist societies think see Juraj Kušnierik, Milan Čičel: *Shadows of the Past*, CityGate Research Papers, CityGate, Bratislava, 1994.

paper: although I knew many stories and unrelated bits of Slovak church history, this was probably the first time I really listened to those who remembered some of it. It was probably the first time I tried to understand the story in its context. A deeper respect and appreciation of the generation of my parents was an important and beneficial 'by-product'.

- *It helps us understand the context of other members of our community, of what they think and why.* Appreciation of each other, based on a deeper understanding of our history, could be very helpful for the Christian community. What we see when we meet others is only the tip of the iceberg. Our invisible parts are hidden in our own personal histories, which to a large extent have made us who we are.

2.1.1. Public and Personal History

It is important to recognise the distinction between our personal and public history. While public history is objective and happens outside of us, much of our personal history is hidden, and sometimes - consciously or subconsciously - suppressed in our privacy. It is not in the public domain. It is well protected 'private property'.

While the 'soft' persecution during 'normalisation'⁸ was a part of public history, my own attitudes, actions and responses during this same period of history are part of my personal story. If I made ethical compromises (such as signing a petition against 'American imperialism' or a statement against the dissidents, or was silent when I should have spoken out, etc.) because of the fear of losing my safe job, I am ashamed of it and will probably not like to share it with others. I would know I had done something wrong (although everybody, or almost everybody, was doing it) and although I might be able to find many good excuses for my actions ("I did it for a higher goal of spreading the Gospel"; "Christians should not be involved in politics"; "I did it for my children"; etc.), I would still feel guilty and ashamed about it. My children will never understand why am I so sceptical about freedom or integrity in public life. My subconscious fear of authority, my nervousness at a border crossing when I am asked to show my passport, or maybe my deep conviction that one cannot become wealthy without being immoral - all these could not be understood without remembering the past.

Personal history is often private and unspoken because of fear, anxiety, jealousy, shame, greed, hidden anger, or feelings of guilt.

Each one of us has a dynamic personal history behind him or her. Some parts of this history could be the most protected areas of our personalities. They appear on the surface in the form of seemingly unexplainable feelings, attitudes and emotional reactions. It might be worthwhile from time to time to look inside and study our private personal histories.

The central message of the Gospel is reconciliation. Without this on the personal level all of our public Gospel presentations have little meaning.

It might not be necessary to expose our personal histories publicly, it is necessary to make sure we have appropriately dealt with it.

Dealing with public history is sometimes much easier because it is visible and, often, undisputed. My personal history is known only to me and even that only partially. Reckoning with one's private history with its emotional and subjective dynamics might be very difficult, but we want to suggest it as an extremely important step towards the restoration of our families and communities. If the past is not reckoned with, we might find ourselves in a situation similar to the foolish dentist who tries to heal her hurting patient only with pills against a headache instead of dealing with a broken tooth, the real cause of the pain.

⁸ The persecution of Christians and other violations of human rights after 1968 (called "normalisation" by the communist leadership) was much softer in Czechoslovakia than in the 1950s. If people kept their ideas in private they could live a peaceful life. If one was satisfied with low paid, manual work, he could to some extent even go public.

Many problems in our communities might have their roots in the unhealed and hurting areas of our own personal histories. Their healing needs a lot of courage, and honesty. It would not be possible without the loving acceptance of our God in whom “we live and move and have our being”⁹.

2.2. Our Context - The Fragmented History of Slovakia

I write these lines in a 60 year old house in a small Liptov (Northern Slovakia) village. I am actually sitting in a room that belonged to the sister of my wife’s grandmother. She passed away only 2 years ago. I mention these details because this lady personally remembered the daughter of Michal Miloslav Hodža - she was her great-grandmother. The name of Hodža, together with Štúr and Hurban is tied with the codification of the Slovak language. This important event in Slovak history, which marked the beginning of Slovak national awareness and activism in the 19th century, is still in our living memory. We know the people who knew children of those who systematised the language we speak.

The house I am staying in was built in the 1930s in a Russian aristocratic style with a long pine alley, an orchard, simple but functional architecture. The people who had it built, my wife’s grandparents, gave Russian names to all their children. They were 'Slavophiles', i.e. Slavic intellectuals who put their political and cultural hopes in the great Russian Empire.

During World War II this family was on the side of the 'democrats', i.e. Slovak anti-fascist opposition. The house still has marks from artillery grenades fired from across the valley. Grenades fired by the Slovak Army, suppressing the 1944 Slovak National Uprising which this household supported.

These are just few interesting moments from the history of a Slovak family. Each family has its own. They illustrate an important feature of Slovak history - namely, that the most important developments happened in a very short time, and even in this short time span they were extremely fragmented. Our grandparents lived in at least six different states, without ever leaving home: the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy (up to 1918), the First Czechoslovak Republic (1918-1939), the Slovak Republic (1941-1945), the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic (1948-1989), the Czecho-Slovak Federal Republic (1989-1992), and finally, the Slovak Republic (since 1993). Each of these socio-political formations tried hard to break with the past and initiate a 'new era'. As a Slovak historian said, “the history of Slovakia is the history of demolitions and 'new beginnings’¹⁰. Each of them represent a totally different form of government and ideology: from a pseudo-feudal monarchy, through liberal democracy, fascism, communism, and a postcommunist federation, to the current postcommunist nation-state. Each of them left a mark on our 'collective memory'. All of them together put deep into our minds the feeling that history is a set of unconnected periods, that a “historic continuity” is an illusion, that if there is one thing we can learn from history, it is that it does not matter - we do not create it, it is always imposed on us.¹¹

This conclusion is, of course, not true. Our history - fragmented as it is - influences us more than we are aware of. The question we want to ask in this chapter is:

What are the critical historical moments, influencing the current state of the evangelical community in Slovakia?

⁹ Acts 17:28.

¹⁰ Pavel Dvořák in the Slovak TV talkshow “*Kroky*”, June 1996.

¹¹ It is important for missionaries and foreign aid workers to understand their history and historical outlook might be very different.

2.2.1. Roots of Evangelicalism in Slovakia¹²

The Evangelical movement in Central Europe grew out of the German and Swiss Reformation. While the Lutheran influence was more wide spread in the Slavic nations of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, the Calvinist influence was felt more exclusively in Hungary. This national division has stayed the same until the present times.

Lutheran and Reformed Churches see the importance of their great history. The Slovak National Awareness movement in the 19th century was led by a group of Lutheran priests. The roots of Slovak literature are tied with Lutheran authors. The Reformed Church identifies its past with the history of the Hungarian Reformation and national movement, and even now is seen as a symbol of Hungarian culture in Slovakia. Both of these denominations can be considered 'traditional' in the sense that their history goes back to the Lutheran and Calvinistic reformation, respectively, and as such are understood to be vital part of national culture and history. Although both of them have experienced a significant decline of membership and influence in culture and society, they are still an important part of the Slovak cultural landscape.

The evangelical denominations grew out of a broader Protestant context. On the following pages we will consider key influences which helped shape Slovak evangelicalism.

i) Pietism - an Inspiration of Personal Spirituality and Holiness¹³

The pietist influence in the Lutheran church in 18th century Slovakia was an important impulse for the 'refreshment' of the Slovak Lutheran church and culture. Study at the pietist university in Halle had a strong impact on a whole generation of Lutheran priests and intellectuals. Matej Bel, the most famous among them, was considered in his time to be a member of the Hungarian intellectual elite for his polyhistoric knowledge and scientific achievements¹⁴. Pietist ideas were not accepted by the mainstream of the Lutheran church. The pietist wing of the Slovak Lutheran Church was suppressed by the contemporary church establishment¹⁵.

The main significance of Pietism in the history of the Slovak church is in its inspirational impact on the formation of the evangelical movement at the end of the 19th century. The pietist spirituality of Zinzendorf's Herrnhut¹⁶ community has been acknowledged as an inspiration and example for Central European evangelicals ever since.

Pietists stressed two important aspects of spiritual life: (1) the experience of a personal relationship with God and (2) a desire for a growth in holiness. Both of them deserve a closer look since they shape much of what is understood as 'typical evangelical' spirituality today.

a) The Experience of a Personal Relationship with God

One of the key words of evangelicalism has been 'conversion', or 'new birth'. Not only a proper knowledge of theological doctrine but the experience of a personal relationship with Jesus is crucially important. "If Jesus was not born in your heart, he was born in vain", was just one expression of this shift from a 'cold' theology to the 'warmth' of personal experience. One's relationship with God was considered primarily a matter of one's heart. Personal testimony became much more important than history embodied in dead tradition.

¹² I am indebted to Dr. Juraj Potúèek and Dr. Vladimír Fajfr for much insight and useful comments on the history of evangelical movement in Slovakia.

¹³ For a description of history and theology of Pietism see Appendix 5.2 *Pietism*

¹⁴ For a good article on Matej Bel and his times and works, see Ondrej Lupták: *Matej Bel, in Evanjelikálne kresťanstvo, zborník prednášok*, ECM, Bratislava, 1995.

¹⁵ Matej Bel, the most famous Pietist scholar, had to leave the city of Banská Bystrica in 1714 because of his theological convictions.

¹⁶ For a more detailed description of this unique and influential community, see Appendix 5.2, *Pietism*

This very important emphasis on a personal response to God's saving calling, together with individual responsibility before God, led to a re-discovery of the Gospel as the "power for salvation". This stimulated unprecedented evangelistic activity, spiritual devotion and charity. All this usually took place in a hostile environment where small evangelical communities were treated as unwelcome sects. For example in Klenovec, a small Slovak town with a relatively big Baptist Church, Baptist children were not allowed to attend the Lutheran elementary school. A State school had to be established to solve the problem. The town council also forbade burials of Baptists in the Lutheran cemetery. A Baptist cemetery had to be established in 1914. All this happened before W.W.I.¹⁷

On the other side we should say this also led to a certain 'subjectivisation' of faith. The stress on a personal relationship with God placed the objective side of Christianity (primarily theology, doctrines and history) to an undeserved shadow. The rise of liberalism in Germany also contributed to an increased suspicion of 'theology'. At times it might have looked as if the most important thing in Christianity is one's *personal* decision to accept Jesus as his or her *personal* Saviour, followed by *personal* spiritual growth - instead of the Triune God, the Creator, the Redeemer and the Judge, and *His* acts in history.

"He was an evangelist, his son was a pastor, his grandson was a doctor of theology whose son was an unbeliever." This sentence is quoted as a joke among Slovak evangelicals. It is an exaggeration of a shared conviction: "the more theology, the less living faith". Those who "think too much" are treated with suspicion. Simplistic concepts of Christianity are often preferred.

b) A Desire for a Holy Life

Another important feature of Pietism, significantly influencing our evangelical fathers, was the concept of *holiness*. A born-again Christian should live according to God's will and his relationship with his Saviour should be visible in the quality of his life. The holy lives of the first Baptists in Liptov, members of the Blue Cross in Stará Turá or the Plymouth Brethren, were certainly the strongest testimony of their vital relationship with God. It often gave them credibility and respect in the eyes of their unbelieving neighbours.

The desire for a holy life created strong tensions in the lives of our evangelical forefathers: How to stay clean in a sinful world? Some of them tried to withdraw from public life with its complex ethical dilemmas to a much simpler world of small evangelical communities. They not only refrained from drinking and smoking, but also avoided theatres and cinemas (or even the circus), or did not want to be lawyers or politicians, since in these positions "they would not be able to show Christ's love to other people"¹⁸. Accusations of fanaticism and escapism by an unbelieving society were probably not always without a reason. They were considered as "nice" but "strange".

An attempted escape from the influences of the sinful world brought a 'sectarian image' with it. This did not make evangelical communities very attractive for unbelievers. It actually built a cultural wall around small evangelical churches; walls that made communication of the Gospel to those from whom we tried to escape difficult, if not impossible.

ii) 'Let There Be Light' - Examples of Revivals in Slovakia

Evangelical revivals that took place in the second half of the 19th century in The United States and Great Britain had a significant impact on the Central European region. We can say that it was the only time in the history of the Slovak church when something close to a popular spiritual movement took place - although even in this case it did not reach the wider society. The recognised centre of the

¹⁷ For details, see Ján Šaling and col.: *Niesli svetlo evanjelia, Bratská jednota baptistov v SSR*, Bratislava, Czechoslovakia, 1988.

¹⁸ P. Kondaè: *Baptisti... in Rozsievàè 3/95*.

revival was Stará Turá, a small town in Western Slovakia. Another region that experienced an awakening was Liptov and Spiš in the mountains of Northern Slovakia. While the first gave birth to the Free Evangelical churches, the latter marked the beginning of the Baptist movement in the northern parts of the Austro-Hungarian Empire which, after 1918, was institutionalised as the Baptist Union in Czechoslovakia.

a) Blue Cross in Stará Turá

*“When, in the beginning of time, God the Creator said: ‘Let there be light!’, there was light and this light shone over the chaos and abyss. He said His ‘Let there be light!’ over us too, and when the light of the nations, Jesus Christ, started to shine in souls and hearts, it shone over the chaos and abyss. We can simply call this situation: ‘revival’.”*¹⁹

It was in 1876 in Stará Turá when Kristína and Mária Royová received, for the first time, a copy of *Betánie*, a Czech evangelical revivalist magazine, edited and published by Jan Kostomlatský, a pastor of the Free Reformed Church in Prague. The quotation from Kristína Royová’s memoirs with which we started this chapter is her description of the impact this magazine had on them. Although they were good Lutherans (children of an outstanding Lutheran pastor) who knew the Bible and tried to live according to what they read, for the first time they experienced a personal encounter with Jesus Christ. Soon afterwards they experienced conversion and the gift of new life in Jesus Christ. A very important revival thus began, the centre of which was Stará Turá and the villages and small towns around it. As a result of enthusiastic missionary activity, the revival spread to other Slovak regions. In 1899 the Slovak branch of the Blue Cross association was registered in Budapest and the ‘Stará Turá movement’ became a part of this institution until 1939, when the Blue Cross was banned by the authorities of the fascist Slovak Republic.

From the very beginning the mission activities were not limited to Slovakia (or Hungary of which it was a part). The Blue Cross community financially supported missionaries in China and Africa, they kept correspondence with them and prayed for them. *“The children from our first Sunday school, together with us, collected their small gifts for the mission, and it was a great event for us when we sent the first 100 crowns for pagans.”*²⁰, remembered Kristína Royová.

The “Stará Turá revival” at the turn of the century has given a distinct flavour to our evangelical churches until now. It is still within the living memory of the older generation of evangelicals. When anybody speaks about “a revival”, Kristína and Mária Royová, Stará Turá and the Blue Cross still come to the minds of many people. If not for anything else, because of their numerous songs and books which became an important part of the revival heritage.

b) Baptists in Spiš and Liptov

At about the same time, the second half of the 19th century, the first Baptist communities were established in Spiš (Northern Slovakia)²¹. The Baptist movement came to Slovakia from Germany and from Budapest. One of the first Baptist missionaries was Henrich Meyer, who in 1873 became a pastor in Budapest. He spent 10 years in missions in the Carpathian Basin, including Slovakia. In 1875-1876 he baptised several German citizens from the city of Kežmarok (the baptism took place in Budapest). The first public baptism in Slovakia took place in April 1882 near Liptovský Sv. Mikuláš,

¹⁹Kristína Royová: *Za svetlom a so svetlom, Rozpomienky Kristíny Royovej*, Stará Turá, Czechoslovakia, 1928, p. 42.

²⁰Royová, p. 132.

²¹The first Baptist in what is now Slovakia was, according to Ján Jančuš in his article on the beginnings of the Baptist Church in Slovakia (*Niesli svetlo evanjelia, Bratská jednota baptistov*, Bratislava, 1988, p. 31) a certain Johann Tatter, a German smith from Spiš. He was baptised in 1875 in Budapest.

the first Baptist church²² was built in 1890 in Vavrišovo. This church “became the spiritual centre of Baptists in Hungary and later in Czechoslovakia”²³.

The Baptists in Liptov and Spiš were a 'multi-ethnic' community, consisting of Germans and Slovaks, with strong Polish, Czech, Hungarian (before the first Baptist community in Slovakia, in Vavrišovo, became an independent church it was officially a part of the Budapest Baptist Church) and German connections. Mission activities spread in each of these ethnic communities and soon reached beyond Northern Slovakia.

iii) *Foreign Influences*

None of the revivals in Slovakia occurred as a geographically isolated event. There were strong personal and theological connections with other movements in Europe and the United States. We will now look at some of their key influences.

a) *Geographic neighbours*

We must remember that the beginnings of evangelicalism in Slovakia took place when it was still a part of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. Whatever was happening in Slovakia, was actually happening, at least, in Hungary. Most of the Slovak evangelical pastors for several generations studied at German and Swiss universities (such as Neukirchen or St. Chrischona). German, Swiss and Austrian (especially Viennese) pastors often visited evangelical communities in Slovakia, while Slovak pastors and evangelists often spent some part of their life in Hungary, Austria or in southern regions of the monarchy (Vojvodina, Slavonia, Moldova).

Since the times of the Hussites (reaching Slovakia primarily through the Krakow University), there had been strong connections with Lutherans in Southern Poland (Galicia, Silesia). The case of pastor August Meereis, the Polish pastor who established the first Slovak Baptist church in the northern town of Vavrišovo, shows these connections were still alive at the end of the 19th century.

The vital link with the Czech church and culture in the second half of the 19th century cannot be overemphasised. Slovakia, suffering from strong 'magyarisation'²⁴, turned to her 'Czech brothers', living in the more free and more developed Austrian part of the monarchy. We already mentioned the decisive influence of the Czech Free Reformed Church on the revival movement in Stara Tura. We could have also mentioned Jindřich Novotný or Norbert Éapek, outstanding Baptist pastors from Prague and Brno, who were regular guests in Slovak churches. We could have mentioned the Czech Methodists, or Czech Brethren who significantly contributed to the development and growth of evangelical Christianity in Slovakia. The Slovak evangelical church was 'Czecho-Slovak' in the best sense of this word.

b) *Slovak emigration*

“In 1989 Ondrej Slabej left Vavrišovo for America with his whole family. He later became the pastor of Slovak Baptist churches in Richmond, Philadelphia. In 1902 the three oldest daughters of pastor Matej Števèek went to New York. He himself moved to New York with the rest of his family in 1893. Eduard Catlos, a pastor in the USA, was born in Liptovský Sv. Peter. Brother Vincent Peter Stupka, after graduating from the seminary in Prague, went to

²² This church was established by August Meereis, a famous Polish pastor from the Zyrardow Polish Baptist Church, located in a section of Poland that was then under Russian rule.

²³ *Niesli svetlo evanjelia*, p.47.

²⁴ 'Magyarisation' refers to the efforts, especially during the 19th century until the end of W.W.I, to force non-Hungarian nationals who were a part of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy to attend Hungarian schools, speak Hungarian and to, as much as possible, adopt the Hungarian culture. The Slovak National Movement began as a reaction against this pressure.

the USA after the War. The oldest brothers grieved about these losses and often used to say: 'They stole our best people to go to America.'"²⁵

The end of the 19th century marked the beginning of waves of emigration to the USA. It was caused by the low standard of living in the Slovak countryside coupled with strong industrial growth in America which provided relatively well paid jobs for an unqualified work force. It lasted for about 50 years and influenced not only America, but also the countries the emigrants were leaving behind. Most Slovaks who went to America planned to stay there only for a short time - to earn some money - and come back.

There were between 600,000 and 700,000 Slovaks living in America by the end of W.W.I²⁶, which was more than *one quarter of the Slovak population* at that time. Most stayed in the United States. Those who came back brought with them not only money, but also a new culture, and some also, a new religion. This is especially clear in the story of the Slovak Baptists who were significantly influenced by the Slovaks who went to the States and then after the end of W.W.I made missionary trips to their old homeland, some of them returning for good. It is important to note that the majority of Slovak emigrants had virtually no education, many were illiterate. During their several years in America a 'new world' opened for them and not a few uneducated Slovaks got a proper education and became successful entrepreneurs. Among other things they learned typical American activism and efficiency. Quite a number of Slovak emigrants became converted and some of them were educated in leading American Bible schools and colleges.

Their impact on their old homeland was very strong. They provided significant financial resources for the church, Christian publishers and charity. They provided much needed encouragement for weak evangelical communities. Some of those who returned became key church activists, especially in evangelism. They also brought with them American culture and theology which sometimes clashed with the traditional, prevailingly Roman Catholic, environment in Slovakia.

c) Foreign missionaries

The second half of the 19th century was a time of great world-wide mission activity. Central Europe was no exception. Smaller evangelical denominations, such as Baptists, Church of the Brethren, or Plymouth Brethren, were actually established in a close co-operation with Scottish, English, and, especially, American mission agencies. While the Slovak Baptist church was established with the help of German missionaries, the first board of the Free Reformed Church in Prague (the predecessor of the Church of the Brethren in the Czech and Slovak Republics) committee consisted of two American missionaries (Clark and Porter of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions) and three Czech pastors (Adlof, Urbánek and Hochman)²⁷. These missionaries had a long-term commitment for the work in Central Europe with the ultimate goal of developing a local evangelical community that would be able to carry on the work and 'own' it. Their significance in the establishment and development of evangelical churches in the Czech and Slovak Republics cannot be over-estimated.

Whether they were European neighbours, returned emigrants, or American missionaries, all of them - consciously or unconsciously - brought their own understanding of the Gospel and, actually their own culture and theology with them: Pietism or Liberal theology from Germany, Reformed and Presbyterian theology from England and Scotland, Revivalist and Dispensational theology from the United States. In a 'normal' situation - i.e. a longer period of peaceful and free development - these influences would have been recognised and dealt with. The devastating consequences of the two world wars followed by 40 years of communism did not provide the conditions the church needed to

²⁵ *Niesli svetlo evanjelie*, p.55.

²⁶ Ľubomír Lipták: *Slovensko v 20. storočí, Vydavateľstvo politickej literatúry*, Bratislava, Czechoslovakia, 1968, p. 62.

²⁷ *Sto let ve službi evanjelia, Jubilejný sborník Cirkve bratrské*, Rada Cirkve bratrské, Prague, 1981, p.33.

process or sometimes, even to be aware of them. A lack of theological clarity and sharpness, together with a lack of experience in discernment between various modern theological and philosophical streams, might be an unintended by-product of our own history.

Our country has never been an island surrounded by the sea. It has always been more similar to the bustling of an open market, where buyers and sellers come with their various products to create a special atmosphere with a unique flavour. We should acknowledge that and not take everything for granted.

2.3. *Evangelicals in the First Czechoslovak Republic and W.W.II*

The 35 years between 1914 and 1949 were probably the most dramatic period in the modern history of Central Europe. Slovakia belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy in its beginning and to the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic by its end. The inhabitants of Slovakia saw two world wars, four different political establishments and three different States.

Much of what Slovakia stands for now has its roots in this dramatic period. Studying this history is an important and interesting experience. When reading books on the history of evangelical denominations (Baptist Union, Cirkev Bratská) one has a feeling they must have lived in a different world though. We can learn a lot about conferences, evangelistic events, church meetings and denominational politics. But what about the attitudes to rising fascism or communism? What were the consequences of the world wars? How did evangelicals react to the deportation of Jews? And what about the impact of the 'free thinking' liberalism coming into Slovakia from the Czech lands in the mid-war period? And what were the prevailing attitudes to the Germans, Hungarians or Czechs (each of these nationalities being considered 'enemies' at certain times)?

Maybe these issues were not considered important by church historians. Maybe they wanted to emphasise the unchanging, eternal aspects of church life. Or maybe evangelical Christians were simply not interested in these issues when they happened. Some of them were probably afraid and hid behind the curtain of the church door.

In order to get at least some answers to our questions we visited several older people who keep this important period of our history in their living memory. These are our observations from the interviews with them:

- *Evangelical churches were marginally small.* There were 600 members of the Blue Cross Movement in Slovakia in 1941²⁸, that is after more than 40 years of its existence. Numbers of other evangelical organisations and denominations were similarly small. Evangelicals - then as now - saw themselves as an insignificant small island in society. The ideas about doing something that would have a real impact was considered an utopia. To survive and maybe grow a little bit, was a more realistic goal.
- *There was no substantial growth of evangelical churches.* There was no revival or dramatic growth in evangelical churches during this whole period. The 20 years between the wars was probably the most stable and peaceful period of Slovak modern history, it was a time of religious and political freedom as well as relative prosperity. Why didn't the Church grow under these favourable conditions? There was no significant development of theological education during this whole period. Evangelicals lacked theologically educated pastors in 1919 as well as in 1949²⁹.

²⁸ According to the official report showed to me by Dr. Juraj Potúèek.

²⁹ This was, according to one witness, very clear during the talks between representatives of the Slovak Lutheran Church and Blue Cross in Martin and Bratislava in December 1948 and February 1949. "Representatives of the Blue Cross were theologically "defeated" by superb Lutheran theologians (bishops Ruppeldt and Èobrda)" as a witness to these talks told us in a personal interview.

- *The Church was not interested in public life.* Probably the most surprising observation for us, living at the end of the 20th century, is that evangelicals were simply not interested in the dramatic issues of public life. We do not mean that they did not follow the news, nor that they did not have their opinions about nazism or communism. What we mean is that evangelicals did not see the rising totalitarian ideologies worth a simple criticism from a Christian standpoint, if not active resistance. They did not see - then as now - attitudes to the burning issues of public life as a part of their Gospel message. They saw themselves as separate from society.
- *Religious freedom was all the Church wanted.* Our generation, seeing World War II through the lenses of war movies and novels got a picture of conditions one practically could not live in. All we saw were SS uniforms, guerrilla fighters, and concentration camps. But as our fathers remember, it was also a time one could live in, even enjoy. To hear that during the years of W.W.II there existed a time of religious freedom was quite surprising to me. "*But it was not a time of political freedom, though!*", as an old man I talked to added. Evangelicals tried to use the freedom to proclaim their religion by sharing the Gospel in hospitals, spas, even on the streets. They carefully avoided any mentioning of political issues - "*it would limit our possibilities to proclaim the Gospel*", said an old pastor.
- *The Church used the periods of freedom to settle institutional issues.* The period between the two world wars as well as the three short years separating W.W.II and the arrival of the communist regime were times of organisational change in the Church and in the society at large. It is natural and understandable - those were the times of reconstruction and repair of what was broken by the wars. Nobody realised peace and democracy would have such a short life. We can only speculate on the long-term impact if evangelical leaders had invested this precious time to improve theological education or if they had tried to communicate Christianity in the sophisticated environment of university students (by and large attracted to atheism and the communist ideology).

This oppositional, and sometimes antagonistic, stance toward society also affected their success in evangelism. If people are seen to be enemies, or 'the others', those who are in opposition, how can we show them love and care? This misunderstanding of the theology of 'the world' is critical to a lack of healthy growth in the Church.

World War II was a shock to the whole of Europe. Some even saw it as a disappointment in Christianity, since official churches, both Catholic and Protestant, did not do much against fascism and nazism. Personal and public trauma was too painful to be properly dealt with in three short years. One cannot avoid the parallel with the fall of communism in 1989. How long will it take to recover from its shock? And how long will be this time of peace, freedom and relative prosperity? What should we do while it still lasts? Should we concentrate more on theological education, on finding ways of meaningful Christian communication with the people and culture around us? Or shall we concentrate on church politics, institution building and escaping from the complexities of modern life?

We are aware that these observations raise many questions and offer very few answers. This extremely important part of Church history needs to be carefully studied. Some of those who were young and active then are still with us. Their experience and wisdom might be invaluable in times, that are not so dissimilar as it looks at first sight.

2.4. Evangelicals under the Communist Regime

“We, the Church and missions, are like a ship that has seen battle. She has survived, some may even dare to say that the battle is won, but she is wounded, her mast is shot through, her sails are torn, her men are tired and some are scarred. Her Captain gives the order for damage control and for inspection. Only then can He repair the damage, heal the wounds, correct the course and pick up speed.”³⁰

The three years between World War II in 1945 and the communist coup d'état in February 1948 appear now like a commercial break in a movie. These few months were not enough to gather strength for the battle that was to come. Dreams of a peaceful, free and profitable life in a democratic country soon disappeared. Those who survived the war had to face Stalinist persecution. The religious freedom of the First Czechoslovak Republic was soon forgotten. February 25, 1948 marked the official beginning of the communist totalitarian dictatorship in Czechoslovakia.

2.4.1. Attitudes to Communist Ideology and Government

How did Christians react to the Stalinist regime and its ideology? Although communist ideology was in principle atheistic, even militantly anti-Christian, communist governments in Central Europe tried to create a kind of a mutually acceptable co-existence of Church and State. There was just one condition any religious body had to meet: religion had to remain personal and private, any involvement in social life was a strictly forbidden taboo.

“The religious activities of the Church will have unlimited freedom. There will be no barriers put in its way and the priests who follow their honour and conscience will be strongly supported in their work.”³¹

“We can see the enormous responsibility of the builders of this State and we know that if their work should fail, it would be an indescribable destruction of all our material and spiritual property.”³²

“The Communist Party sees believing people as its allies.”³³

We will now look at two important aspects of the complexity of life under the communist regime. Both of them are still very sensitive and should be handled with care. It isn't an issue of pointing our finger at who was guilty or innocent, right or wrong. It is an opportunity to learn and we believe these sensitive areas should be addressed anyway - otherwise we might miss an important source of experience and wisdom when we might need it again.

i) The ethics of compromise

Most of us, as Christians living under the communist regime, knew the religious freedom promised and promoted by the Party was a clear lie and hypocrisy. Only a few said so openly. The rest criticised the regime privately but remained more or less loyal in public. We accepted the principle of obedience and submission to law and government as far as it did not contradict 'God's law'. The 'God's law' we had in our minds was usually limited to either overtly criminal acts (such as stealing,

³⁰ Marsh Moyle, *The Effects of Persecution on Church and Missions in Central and Eastern Europe*, CEMF Research Paper, CEMF, Austria, 1989. Available from CityGate, Slovakia.

³¹ Dr. Alexej ěpička, Minister of Justice in Czechoslovak Socialist Republic in Parliament Speech in 1950, *O Nový pomer cirkvi a štátu*, Tatran, Bratislava, 1950, p.7.

³² Dr. J.L. Hromádka, professor at the Theological Seminary in Prague, *Novy pomer...*, p.24.

³³ Ladislav Holdoš, Communist MP, *Novy pomer...*, p.27

fornication, or murder), or to a denial of our Christian faith (if pushed to the wall³⁴). We tended to overlook God's precepts about justice or truth:

If I met some of my schoolmates on the way to church on Sunday morning, I usually told them I was going to visit friends. It was certainly true - I meant Christian friends. It was certainly a lie - I consciously tried not to be understood.

Why did we behave like that? How much of it was motivated by fear? How much was genuine conviction? Would we commend such a behaviour now? Or are we ashamed of it? These questions should be answered - in openness, honesty and humbleness before God. Only very few things could be more devastating, from the long-term point of view, than to live with permanent, suppressed and unresolved feeling of guilt.

ii) Christianity without social involvement

Social involvement, or the public side of Christianity, has always been an important part of life with God. Caring for orphans and widows, improving education or resisting the absolutist aspirations of political leaders has been understood as a visible expression of invisible spiritual truths. During certain times Christianity has actually been *reduced* to public matters and church politics. It always provoked a reaction - a reform movement or theological school stressing the existential, subjective and personal aspects of Christianity. One such reaction was the pietist movement which greatly influenced Eastern European evangelicalism. During the times of fascist and communist totalitarian regimes, this attitude was fostered by political and ideological pressure. Christians were advised to withdraw from public life as much as it was possible. Silent outward loyalty to the communist government was supposed to be balanced by 'spiritual' loyalty to God and Church.

Some church leaders would have argued that a certain degree of loyalty and ethical compromise was necessary from a strategic point of view. The main goal is to spread the 'Good News', everything else is secondary. But what is the good news if it cannot touch any part of life except the 'religious or spiritual'?

So we might have said we supported the communist government (even if we actually hated it), or we may publicly have said that human rights in our country were not being violated (even if we personally knew somebody who was imprisoned for criticising the government or for bringing Christian literature to the Soviet Union), if it helped the promotion of the Gospel. Promotion of the Gospel usually meaning: permission to build a church building, have legalised church services, or even sometimes, to have the eyes of a communist bureaucrat shut towards youth group meetings or choir performances.

A good example is the support of collectivisation³⁵ by the late J.O. Markuš, the famous Brethren Church pastor in Levice. He made his decision only after many discussions and prayers. *“He was ready to suffer if it was God's will that they should not obey the government in this issue. ... After a lot of thinking, brothers received the light. They decided that Christians, together with all other citizens, should respect the regime and government that God gave them. The important thing is that the Church would find space for proclaiming the Gospel in the prevailing conditions. So J.O. Markuš decided to support the collectivisation of private farms. This was reflected in his sermons as well. The government saw it and supported him in his church ministry.”*³⁶

³⁴ If I was asked: “Do you believe in God or not?”, I would probably have been brave enough to say “Yes, I do”. But if somebody asked me: “Do you go to church?”, I would probably say “No, I don't”. I would explain to my guilty conscience that I really don't go to church - I go to a congregation (as we evangelicals called our meetings).

³⁵ That means (usually) forced creation of collective farms aimed at destroying “the class of private farmers”. In Slovakia this took place mostly in the 1950s.

³⁶ Ondrej Prištiak: *Z pokolenia na pokolenie*, ECM, Bratislava, Slovakia 1995, p. 62.

Many Christians, together with the rest of the 'silent majority', were afraid of the possible consequences of their eventual 'political' attitudes - even if they felt these would express a proper application of biblical principles. The experience of the cruel persecution in the 1950s was difficult to forget. It was not only a question of courage. If a father of three children was asked to sign a paper saying he would give information about the activities of his church it was extremely difficult to refuse it. Knowing that a refusal would put his children, and maybe also his church, in a difficult situation, he signed. But he might also have to make a decision not to give any sensitive information or to let the board of elders know about it.

It would be very easy, but wrong, to judge this kind of behaviour now. We do not want to do this. We must respect and understand the complex conditions of life under the communist regime. It might be useful to re-examine the theological arguments these attitudes were based on. We might find some of them too influenced by the "spirit of the age". It might also be useful to look at our own decisions and attitudes and try to find out how much they were based on our trust in the Lord and to what extent we used religious concepts in order to cover our own fear.

2.4.2. Public and Private Life

"The church in the communist regime has to find its place in the State structure. It is not called to talk to the 'business' of politicians, scientists, technicians or other public personalities. Jesus Christ did not do it either."³⁷

This remarkable statement comes from J.L. Hromádka, the former dean of the Comenius Theological Seminary in Prague and a very influential theologian. It expresses well a common conviction that the church and Christianity have their given place in life, and this place is in the so called '*religious*' or '*spiritual*' realm of our private lives. The division of life into its public and private spheres was thus buttressed by theological authority.

The 'social schizophrenia' of modern life that was supposed to be *healed* by holistic Christian mission was instead *embraced* by Christian theologians, pastors and laymen.

We should be careful to see the difference between the role and responsibility of the Church as an institution and the responsibility of individual Christians. There have been several models of the co-existence of Church and State in the past; from the Holy Roman Empire (where the Church and secular hierarchy were practically identical), through Luther's concept of two spheres and two loyalties, or Calvin's attempt in Geneva of a city governed according to biblical principles, to the American model of the constitutional separation of Church and State. This is to name just the most important ones. All of them dealt with the Church as an institution. In each historical period mentioned there were individual Christian men and women who were, with varying intensity, aware of their responsibility for the world they lived in.

In this chapter we are more concerned with the attitudes of individual Christians, not with the Church as an institution of a modern State.

The popular slogan: "Whoever doesn't steal from the State, steals from his family", actually became a rule of thumb for many ethical decisions - and not only for the secular society. Christians also tended to see their private lives - family, Church, and friends - operating under a set of slightly different rules than the world 'out there'. The division of life between its public and private spheres was a survival reflex, forced by the experience of life under the communist regime.

Our 'religious life' was lived in our private sphere. Not that we proclaimed a 'Sunday Christianity'. We rightly believed our relationship with God should affect our daily lives. Some even said it must be

³⁷ J.L. Hromádka, *Evangelium o ceste za èlovikem*, quoted in Prištiak, p. 62.

visibly clear that we are different. The problem was in our reduction of Christianity into limited acts of personal behaviour, family and church relationships, politeness, plus, of course, Bible reading, prayer, regular attendance at church services, and when possible, testimony to a non-believer.

Thinking from a biblical perspective about issues which did not belong to the private sphere was dangerous. We instinctively knew that some answers would put us together with dissenters - which was uncomfortable. This pietistic emphasis on separation from the world prepared fertile soil for withdrawal from public life. Although it might have helped us survive communism, it brought the following unwelcome consequences for evangelism and left us unprepared for life in a pluralist postcommunist society:

- *Communication of faith.* Privatisation of our faith made communication of Christianity in a culturally relevant way very difficult. Since we were not used to discussing public issues from a biblical perspective, we did not develop a relevant vocabulary and language. The only language we were able to use was perceived as cliché by our non-Christian friends. When we said “Jesus loves you” to an unchurched person, we actually said three words with a very ambiguous meaning. Who do you mean by Jesus? What is love? Who am I? To answer these questions in common language (i.e. non-religious) is not so easy.
- *Lack of (intellectual) integrity.* Limiting Christianity to the 'spiritual' realm of life, we usually did not even try to understand the issues beyond this sphere (such as economics, philosophy, art, science) from a biblical perspective. Several generations of university students had to learn about a Marxist political economy. How many of them were encouraged to think it through from biblical perspective? The result of this was acceptance of the prevailing world-view in everything except our narrowly defined 'religious' sphere of life.
- *Creating a religious area of life.* By limiting Christianity to our privacy we actually limited it to 'a religion', and thus fostered the division between 'religious' and 'secular' spheres of life. This attitude supported (and was supported by) the Marxist notion of religion having its proper place only in the private 'religious' area of life. Although most evangelical Christians would disagree with this in theory, many of them applied it when they agreed with the privatisation of their faith. To accept this framework is to accept that there is a 'spiritual' area that functions *outside* of the context of the rest of life and that the rest of life can function *without* the 'spiritual' dimension. This is much closer to paganism than to historic biblical Christianity.

2.4.3. Church and Ministry

How did the Christian community, the Church, cope with the life under communism? How did she live, what were her strengths and weaknesses? The communist period of our history is still very much in our living memory. It might be useful to look at some of the issues that were then only rarely discussed. They are worth discussing since they might have a direct impact on our present situation.

i) Authority, power, and position in the Church

The communist society was rigid and hierarchically structured. It tried to force a similar structure on Christian denominations. Although most evangelical denominations are congregational, a strong hierarchy was imposed. This gave an institutional authority to some church leaders. This was both a privilege and a burden. Leading positions in the Church were often retained until retirement. Those in leading positions had unique opportunities to travel abroad, contacts with the Western world, including, in some cases, financial and material benefits. The temptations to misuse power were sometimes very strong. An authoritarian way of church management often leads to tension with the

next generation. Those who gained authority in an informal way (by their gifts, life, wisdom, influence) were treated with suspicion - as a potential threat to the official establishment.

It is difficult to tell how much of this was the inevitable consequence of living under communism and how much actually had more to do with the character of individuals. A strict hierarchy and authoritarian leadership were simply assumed.

Authoritarian leadership in local churches and denominations became next to impossible after 1989. Younger people, without a long experience of life under communism, are much more independent and flexible. They do not easily accept authorities because of their positions in the church hierarchy, they want to choose their authorities because of their work, gifts and personal relationships. This might lead to frustration in church leaders as control of the Church slips from their hands. It might also lead to disappointment in the authoritarian church by independent-minded young people. Growth and development of the Church might suffer.

ii) Habits of the heart

We have already mentioned the complexities of one's attitudes to communist authorities. No Christian gladly accepted those who were in power. Many actually hated them and privately prayed and hoped God would put the end to their rule. One thing we do not like to speak about today is that most of us were actually very much afraid of them. Fear was a basic feature of life under communism. We were afraid of being overheard in a tram, we were afraid our phones were tapped, of being watched, we were afraid of policemen, the secret police, directors, party members, politicians, our bosses, bus conductors, etc. We were afraid of the authorities. All this seems unrealistic today.

How did we deal with our fear?

The honest answer is that we tried to justify it as much as we could. We used theological arguments about being obedient to kings and rulers, or about not being involved in this passing and sinful world.

We often suppressed fear, we felt guilty and our inner anger grew. It would be interesting to try to identify how much of our nervousness and anger today has its roots in our guilt feelings.

It would be much more honest to say that we are staying in our privacy, we pretend not to see the injustice around us *because we are afraid*. Accepting our own fear might help us to overcome it in our times of 'wild capitalism'. Are we not afraid of this new pagan, capitalistic, immoral, and incredibly complex society? If we are, we should face our fears and anxieties in a Christian way instead of pretending they do not exist; we should share them with God and seek His encouragement.

iii) Measures of success

How did the Church measure success during this time? What would have had to happen for a pastor of a local church to say "We are doing all right. We see God is with us."?

The most obvious way to measure success in our modern times (of which communism was the supreme expression) is by *numbers*: How many people come to church? How many new members has our denomination accepted this year? Dreams about numerical greatness have always been a characteristic of Slovak evangelicals.

Another common concept of success is *regular church attendance*. 'Attendance at services' had (and still has) the same meaning as 'my relationship with God is all right'. Those who came to church regularly did not need to face embarrassing questions about their 'spiritual problems'. The ideal Christian family was a nice couple with polite children, with nothing 'abnormal', who sang in the

choir, were well dressed, a bit grey, not below or above average and who regularly attended church (Sunday morning and evening, Wednesday evening, Friday evening choir rehearsal - at least). It was not very different from the official ideal of communism - a classless society without rich or poor, where everyone is satisfied, everyone is nice and good, without questions, without problems, without doubts. The ideal Church was not very different.

By accepting these concepts of success we lost a sense of the dynamics of spiritual life. We tended to put numbers above character, church attendance above relationships and a façade of stability above the adventure of spiritual growth.

iv) *Survival and evangelism*

The main aim of the Church during persecution in the 1950s was survival. Conditions were difficult: strong atheistic education and propaganda, the threat of persecution and imprisonment for active Christians, marginalisation of Christian communities, and the general perception of religion as something weird which belongs to the past. Christian convictions were being thoroughly tried and only the strongest and bravest ones passed the test.

If someone had tried to encourage Eastern European Christians with a great vision of “reaching the country for Christ”, or proclaiming the Good News to the whole nation, he would have been perceived with a strong suspicion of spiritual insanity. The highest goal our fathers could think of was to keep the next generation in the local church, to protect it as much as possible from the pressures of 'scientific atheism' and the lure of a potential career made possible by denial of his or her religion. Defensive attitudes were understandable - the world outside the small Christian communities was hostile and dangerous. One should retreat from it if he could. Young people growing up in the church were advised (and sometimes forced) to spend their time with their Christian friends, to be involved in church activities (choir, work with children, youth group). All of this was aimed at survival. Communist propaganda taught that the Church would cease to exist in the next 20-30 years. It was easy to submit to the imposed fatalism.

Allow me to be personal here:

Until I was about 16 years old I was not able to imagine that someone who did not grow up in the Church would become a Christian. I felt Christianity was something so radically different from the general culture that one had to grow up in it to understand it. During the late 1970s and early 1980s my views were changed. I met the first 'converts' in my life. They were the first signs of a change in the Church and also a change in the broader society. Christianity survived and was here to stay. There were some individuals and small groups in the Church who were convinced it was possible and necessary to try to communicate the Gospel to non-Christians, to those outside the small Christian communities. Attempts to 'spend time with unbelievers', to 'do evangelism', to 'communicate the Gospel' met with ambiguous reactions from the Church. On the one hand it was encouraged, on the other it created a tension within the church culture. Those who understood their calling to be towards non-Christians were criticised for not working enough in the Church. The 'mission mentality' of evangelical denominations did not come easily.

This tensions between survival and evangelism is probably not just a part of our history. The atmosphere in some evangelical local churches remains very much bound to mere survival - in spite of stories of conversions, in spite of evangelistic events, Christian concerts or video presentations.

v) *Definition of the Gospel*

A missionary working with refugees in a refugee camp in Austria told me about an interesting experience he had while sharing the Gospel with a Moslem who had had to leave his country because of his activity against the violations of human rights. He explained to him that the

Good News is about personal salvation through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The refugee reacted: "I don't understand how you Christians can be so selfish and individualistic. You are only interested in your 'personal salvation'. I had to leave my country because I was concerned about justice and freedom!" My friend had to re-discover that the Gospel is not only about how to get an individual human being to heaven. Have we mistaken the way into the Kingdom of Heaven with the Kingdom itself?

Did the experience of communism lead us somehow to a limited definition of the Gospel? Our pietistic evangelical fathers emphasised the personal aspect of faith as a reaction to dead orthodoxy. Our revivalist fathers stressed personal salvation and a personal relationship with God as a reaction to the nominal, formal Christianity of traditional denominations. Both Pietists and Evangelicals were also influenced by the rise of modernism with its individualism, emotions and existential dimension of life.

Did the narrowed 'field of operation' imposed on the Church by the communist regime also narrow our definition of the Gospel? The Gospel has come to be understood as the salvation of an individual. This might be the most important aspect of the Gospel - the way into the Kingdom, but it is probably not the whole content of the Gospel. Our historic roots as well as the constraints forced upon us by the totalitarian regime resulted in our negligence of other aspects of the Good News: justice, truth, relationships in the community, human dignity, the impact on creation, our understanding of history, etc.. Our evangelistic efforts often operated by the rule: "the minimum amount of truth to the maximum number of people".

We already mentioned some examples of where 'strategic lies' (where the end, preaching the Gospel, justified to some extent questionable means) were used in order to spread the Gospel more effectively. They were made possible only by this narrowed understanding. It justified statements of loyalty with the corrupt and evil regime in the name of 'freedom to preach the Gospel'. We did not see any problem with ethical compromises that served the spreading of the Gospel. We did not see that each of these strategic acts cut some vital parts off the Gospel.

Gaps in theological education, together with very little serious communication with the outside world prevented us from seeing what we have misunderstood and what we have missed. Now we can see it more clearly, although our understanding of God, ourselves and our times is still far from perfect. We are responsible for keeping our eyes open and trying to see through our own past. We can hope God will grant the wisdom and discernment which each of us needs so much.

2.5. Attitudes to History

"History cannot be buried like a body. Only by telling the truth about the past can fears about the future be overcome."³⁸

Recognising the importance of history in understanding the present situation prompted us to put questions about attitudes to history in our survey. We asked our respondents, as well as the pastors we talked to, if they think knowledge of church history is important for us today. We also asked them what period of church history is particularly close to their heart.

Our findings could be summarised in the following points:

- General ignorance of history. Although most of the respondents said they think an understanding of church history is important, few got deeper than generally shared clichés. Too much interest in church history smells of traditionalism. Knowledge of local (Central European, Czech and Slovak) church history is not much better. An illusion that 'we are

³⁸ Rory Maclean: *Stalin's Nose*, Flamingo, London, 1992, p. 70

the unprecedented pioneers', that there was nobody before us, that our only predecessors are the twelve apostles, cuts us off from the vital resource of experiences of many godly people who were here before us.

- Idealised view of some periods of history. The early church and, to a lesser extent, 19th century revivals and the Reformation, are the most favourite periods of history, according to the respondents of our survey. From their responses it is clear that they actually have in mind romantic, idealised versions of these historic periods. One respondent, for example, said he likes "*the early, biblical period, since it was not influenced by the world*", another said he likes the same period, since "*the power of God was then demonstrated in its fullness*". There is a shared idea that 'everything is going downhill', that the best times are already over, that we are failures not able to live the idyllic life of the first Christians. This might block our visions and hopes about the present times and the future.
- Personal history unresolved. Whatever is true about the 'big' history, is also true about our own personal histories. We tend to suppress our bad memories and idealise the good ones. Not dealing with our own past in an appropriate manner leaves us puzzled by seemingly 'unexplainable' pressures and tensions in the present. If one starts to listen to older, well respected Christian leaders (as we did during our survey), he might be surprised about the amount and significance of unresolved issues from the past which still hurt today.

Dealing with the past does not mean only to study thick volumes of church history (although the benefits of this are indisputable). Maybe it means to look back on our own life, the life of our parents, our church and our denomination. Our history is a part of who we are. If we want to really understand ourselves and others, our local community or our denomination, 'listening to our past' might be very helpful. Some people with a living memory reaching back to the beginning of this century are still with us. Not to listen to them would be like missing the last evening bus home. An expensive taxi or a long and tiresome walk would be the only alternatives.

2.6. Summary

We started this section with the question: "Why study history?". We implied that the answer is that it is important in understanding our present situation. Having this in mind we will list some consequences of our history on our present situation:

- Personal history is important, but is often not dealt with properly.
- There might be some areas of theology we have not paid enough attention to - such as the theology of society, social issues and economics, biblical thinking about art and culture, etc..
- A narrowed understanding of spirituality - as something limited to the 'spiritual/religious' sphere of life.
- A loss of common language with the rest of society, which makes relevant communication of the Gospel to people outside the Church next to impossible.
- An authoritarian leadership style of some church leaders which does not encourage personal growth and development.
- The loss of a 'big' vision and the belief that change in society (on a personal as well as structural level) is possible - leading to defensive attitudes towards the outside world.

- Weakened confidence in the Gospel as the agent of change - for individuals as well as communities and cultures.
- The loss of a deep belief in the sovereignty of God over history.

3. The Present Situation - Who Are We?

In this chapter we will list some of the key features of the evangelical community in Slovakia as we identified them in our research. Without aspiring to a complete or final description of the current situation, it might be useful to look at some issues and think them through.

Evangelicals, *euangelion*, evangelism. Active proclamation of the Good News is at the heart of evangelical theology and activity. Mission and evangelism are often stated as the way of life to a new-born believer. Why then, do evangelicals feel so uncomfortable in the society at large? Why do they, again, have to struggle with the cultural walls around their churches? Why, in spite of many evangelistic activities, is a new convert still a rare species? What are our views about God and the Church, our attitudes to our own history? How do we react to the world around us? How do we communicate the Gospel to our neighbours?

These are some of the questions we asked pastors and lay people in our discussion groups and interviews. With these questions on our minds we read Slovak and Czech Christian magazines, articles, and statements of faith. The responses we got were sometimes encouraging and sometimes disquieting, but almost always true and honest.

We will first look at how evangelicals see themselves - what they see as the mark which distinguishes them from other Christian movements. Then we will try to describe some prevailing views of God, Church and human beings. The last part of this chapter is dedicated to a typical, though dangerous feature of modern Christianity, that is the dualism of the public and private spheres of life.

3.1. Evangelical Identity

The term “evangelicalism”, (“evanjelikalizmus” in Slovak) does not have a long history in the Slovak culture. The closest to it is the term “evanjelický” (from German “evangelische”), which is the official name of the Lutheran Church (“Evanjelická cirkev augsburgského vyznania”). The ambiguity in the understanding of this term led the Theological Mission Seminary to organise a conference on the subject of “Evangelical Christianity” at Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica. In the introduction to the published papers from this conference, Dr. Ľudovít Fazekaš, the director of the Seminary, says:

“People often ask us: ‘We know about Catholic and Protestant (“evangelische”) churches, but what are evangelical denominations?’.

We decided to explain to them who we are and what we stand for. But it has not been so simple. Because as soon as we tried to explain it to others, we discovered that we first have to make clear who we are and what our calling is to ourselves.”³⁹

Dr. Fazekaš described the problem of the evangelical identity. It is not only a clumsy term for the “outside world”. It is not always clear for us either. In the following paragraphs we will look at the most common definitions of evangelicalism by evangelicals⁴⁰.

But before we describe some of the prevailing opinions, we have to say that about 25% of those we talked to (all of whom belonged to evangelical denominations, usually in leading positions) said they do not know, or do not understand what it means.

3.1.1. Negative definitions - knowing who we are not, not knowing who we are

“Evangelicalism is the opposite of Catholicism.”⁴¹

³⁹ Dr. Ľudovít Fazekaš in *Evanjelikálne kresťanstvo*, p.3

⁴⁰ For an overview of the definitions of evangelicalism see Appendix 5.1, *Who Are Evangelicals*.

⁴¹ If no other source is given, quotations are from the interviews with pastors, church leaders and students of theology who took part in our survey.

“Evangelicalism means no traditions.”

“Evangelicalism is characterised by ... no sacraments.”

Maybe due to our historic roots, maybe due to the religious landscape of our country characterised by a nominal confessional Christianity, we often tend to define ourselves by who we are not, rather than by who we are. These negative definitions are usually over simplifications (*“whatever is not Catholic is evangelical”*), as one respondent said) and foster a distorted view of other people. If we define ourselves as the opposite of somebody else, any possibility of communication with them is either ruled out or at least very limited. Negative definitions might also lead to a 'sectarian' atmosphere in our communities - *“we are the only true and holy Church, we are not like them”* - which is what many evangelicals, unfortunately, actually feel.

If we are so different from others, it would be worthwhile to ask who we actually are.

3.1.2. Evangelicals by Instinct

“I feel I am an evangelical, but I don't know exactly why.”

“All of those who believe in Christ and His word are evangelicals.”

“Evangelicals are those who believe in the Gospel”

The biggest group (up to 50%, according to our survey) of evangelical Christians in Slovakia could be called 'evangelicals by instinct'. They 'feel' they belong to this form of Christianity and they somehow 'feel' it is good. They are embarrassed when they are asked why they call themselves 'evangelicals' and not, for example, 'Calvinists'. They are usually able to tell (by religious vocabulary, favourite hymns, shared stories, etc.) who is and who is not an evangelical, what is and what is not 'our community'.

Our instincts are often right and to 'listen' to them is very important. They are formed by many influences from outside and inside. Some might feel evangelical because they grew up in an evangelical environment, met certain people at a certain time, like the songs or the atmosphere at church meetings, feel that *“God sent us to this specific church”* (as several respondents said), experience blessing at church services and Bible study groups, etc..

Instinctive evangelicals are not usually interested in theology, although it might have an impact on their views, attitudes and behaviour. They are much more interested in the subjective experience, atmosphere, or 'aesthetics' of a specific community.

It is very difficult to have a creative and constructive discussion if instincts are in control of our ideas and attitudes. I might use theological biblical language to defend something for which I feel a strong emotional attachment. It is only natural - our thoughts and emotions are always intertwined. It becomes dangerous when we are not able to discern between them. We then tend to base our convictions on emotional attachments, or instincts, *only*. A loss of excitement, or emotional frustration then results in profound spiritual depression.

3.1.3. Evangelicals by Relationship

Those who grew up in evangelical families, who feel accepted in an evangelical community, who belong to a 'network of relationships' in an evangelical church, who 'married into' a church, we called *'evangelicals by relationship'*. When we asked pastors why they are members of their denomination, almost all of them mentioned family and personal relationships as one of the main reasons, many as the only reason.

Trying to keep one's family in the church has been the main goal of believing Christians for several generations. *“I grew up in a Christian family...”*, was the most common beginning of a testimony

given in church. How many church members were simply 'born' into it and then stay in a community because they do not want to risk the loss of a comfortable familial social network?

Those coming from a non-evangelical family background, who converted and became members of a church, often 'chose' their denomination because of relationships as well. According to our observation and experience, it is primarily a quest for relationships and acceptance that brings them to church.

Subjective, Emotionally Laden Definitions

The main problem of subjective and emotionally laden definitions starts when they are wrapped up in theological arguments and are taken as such.

If I identified with my denomination because of its theology and teaching, I should be open to argument and discussion, even to doubt and essential questions. If my belonging to a certain denomination or my identification with a theological school is based only on my personal relationships any theological discussion might be emotionally laden. If somebody questions my confession he is actually touching my relationships. If he is arguing about baptism, the Lord's supper or the way we worship on Sunday morning he is actually attacking my family and upbringing. If he disagrees with a Sunday sermon, it is my duty to defend the pastor...who happens to be the husband of my father's cousin's daughter.

3.1.4. Evangelicals by Conviction

There are some evangelicals who have been led to their conviction by theological seeking. They believe that their views about God, church, sin, and man are based on the correct interpretation of the Bible. Some of them see their theology as the only true one, most of them are humble enough to see their own lack of perfect knowledge and are ready to accept their mistakes.

What do these '*evangelicals by conviction*' really believe? The responses we got in our interviews could be summed up in the following points:

- Jesus as personal Saviour;
- the Bible as the only authority;
- active proclamation of the Gospel - evangelism and mission.

One respondent mentioned the Trinity. Nobody mentioned creation, the total depravity of man, the Church as the body of Christ, God's justice, Kingdom, or eschatological hope. Most did not see themselves in the broader context of Church and theology. We tend to stay with what we emphasise, losing the perspective of the whole picture.

3.1.5. Summary - Who Are Evangelicals?

There are very few Christians, whose faith would be based *only* on relationships, *only* on instincts, *only* on conviction. We are created so that we cannot simply divide our personalities - we have to live with a degree of complexity and ambiguity. To occasionally question our own motives, to ask ourselves why we believe what we believe, why we are doing what we are doing, might be a useful exercise. It might help us to understand ourselves and to avoid many misunderstandings in our communities.

We will now turn to two important sociological aspects of Slovak evangelical communities. Both of them deal with their separation from the non-Christian world, and both of them are based on their self-perception. We often see ourselves as a *minority* and we tend to see ourselves as *subcultures*.

3.1.6. Church as a minority⁴²

A study of any minority group, whether Gypsies, guest workers in Germany, Indians in England or Baptists in Russia shows similar behaviour patterns. This is especially true when the minority is persecuted, mistrusted, despised or seen to be a threat, or perceive themselves to be so.

- They have fixed rules.
- They marry within the group, which results in an intertwined network of family relationships and the creation of “family clans”.
- They are defensive.
- They react negatively to change.
- They are conservative.
- They cling to tradition and traditional values.
- Those who break with tradition are ostracised and excommunicated from the group.
- They tend toward legalism and authoritarianism and have a well defined power and authority structure.
- They feel threatened by approaches from the outside.
- There is strong social pressure to remain in the group when initial belief has gone.
- They tend to create their own language, understandable only within the group.
- The pattern of behaviour and traditions do not easily change, even after the warmth of the initial belief is gone.
- There is a fringe group at the edge always pushing and probing the limits.

These are defence mechanisms through which the minority has learned to survive and to keep its identity. One cannot say that these are the result of persecution as they can be found where persecution does not exist, however persecution certainly speeds up the process.

Evangelical communities - due to their size, history and social structure - tend to show many characteristics of minorities. They might have very little to do with theology or the spiritual state of the Church. They are the characteristics of any cohesive small group which perceives itself as a minority.

We would suggest that it is not primarily the size of a group that gives them the characteristics of a minority. It is the way the members of the group choose to define themselves. Evangelicals tend to see themselves as 'the small flock' surrounded by a hostile world. We have problems in communicating our message to the people around us, we find it hard to avoid perceiving non-Christians as enemies. Some well-intended attempts to open our closed communities leave us with strange experiences which often either reinforce our complex or lead us into temptations bigger than we can handle. What follows is a strengthening of the walls around our Christian ghetto.

What is the way out of this situation? To even try to answer this difficult but important question is beyond the aim of this paper. Maybe this question should be seriously considered by pastors and elders of local evangelical churches. Maybe it should be discussed by those of us working in mission and evangelism. It should be raised by those who, as believing Christians, work and live in a secular environment and want to be salt and light.

⁴² Marsh Moyle, *The Effects of Persecution on Church and Missions in Central and Eastern Europe*, CityGate Research Paper, Austria, 1989, p.9. The paper is available from CityGate, Bratislava, Slovakia.

3.1.7. Subculture⁴³

Every interest group tends to create subcultures. Evangelical churches are no different. A subculture is based on a set of shared basic assumptions about life, ethics, knowledge (or a lack of it), history and future. The church cannot avoid being a subculture. If it does not differ from the rest of society it misses its purpose. The question is whether the main differences should be in language, styles of dress and habits, or in something more substantial: eschatological hope, radical commitment to love and truth, or living in the awe of God. The problem arises when Christians lose their contact with the surrounding culture without even trying to recover it.

When asked whether they have non-Christian friends, most of the respondents in our survey said they do. What they usually meant were their old friends from school and childhood, occasional acquaintances from their neighbourhood, workplace or dormitory. When asked where they meet with them, the majority of the respondents mentioned on the street in town, or on the bus and similar places for random meetings. Some acknowledged their relationships with non-Christians are diminishing - these belong more to the past (when they 'lived in the world') than to the present.

We also asked the question: "Do non-Christians come to your church?". Two thirds of the respondents said, "No.", others said, "Occasionally, but they do not usually stay long in the church." Most of these churches see evangelism as a key element in their ministry, but their meetings do not speak to seeking non-Christians.

The primary contact with the non-Christian world is, in the minds of most evangelicals, in 'evangelistic activity': street evangelism, tent evangelism, 'March for Jesus', showing the Jesus film, evangelistic concerts, etc.. How are these events which are specially designed to communicate to unbelievers, perceived by them?

Almost all of the non-Christians we talked to find them superficial, shallow and manipulative - responding that they do not address the deep issues of life, they do not offer credible, plausible answers.

This observation is in agreement with what Christians think about how non-Christians see them. Practically all of the respondents think their church is seen as a sectarian, weird, in some cases fanatical, group of religious people. They also think they are known primarily by their evangelistic events in the town.

A non-Christian friend said about evangelistic literature (but it often applies to our evangelism in general):

"It does not touch me in either of the two ways any good literature always does: (1) It does not touch me by depth of thought, and (2) it does not speak to my personal situation. I don't know why should I be interested in it."

The conclusions that have to be made are:

- Evangelical churches are culturally inaccessible for those who do not belong to them - visitors are sometimes welcomed if they come, but because of the "strangeness" of the place they rarely stay long;
- Evangelical evangelistic activities, although designed to communicate to seeking unbelievers, in reality communicate only to marginal groups - they are often considered to be superficial and manipulative by thoughtful seeking non-Christian people.

⁴³ "Subculture" usually means a subset of a prevailing "general culture", sharing some assumptions with it, while radically disagreeing with others. In the strict sense of the term, the Church should not be a subculture - a subset of the general culture. It should permeate all areas of life and culture.

The 'evangelical renaissance' in post-war England was started by serious, thought-through ministry among university students - "top boys from top schools" - led by people like John R.W. Stott and James I. Packer⁴⁴. As a result of this, evangelical Christianity became widely accepted as a credible answer to the dilemmas of secular English society. Their honest dealing with the sophisticated questions of their time could be a good stimulus and encouragement for us here, who sometimes have to accept the criticism for being superficial in giving our 'ready-made' answers (often without understanding the questions), as being not far from truth.

We want to be a unique community, distinguished by the virtues of the Kingdom of God, not by our weirdness and superficiality. Our goal should be to attract people to Christ by living in awe of God. The message of Christianity cannot avoid being radical, often offensive. But the cross of Christ, not our strange culture, should be the offence.

3.2. Reflections on What We believe - Our View of God

*“Christian minds have been conformed to the modern spirit: the spirit, that is, that spawns great thoughts of man and leaves room for only small thoughts of God. The modern way with God is to set him at a distance, if not to deny him altogether; and the irony is that modern Christians, preoccupied with maintaining religious practices in an irreligious world, have themselves allowed God to become remote. Clear-sighted persons, seeing this, are tempted to withdraw from the churches in something like disgust to pursue a quest for God on their own.”*⁴⁵

This section touches three aspects of our view of God: thinking about God, the mystery of the Trinity, and our fascination by His greatness. These things are assumed by evangelical community. Maybe because we tend to take them for granted we rarely meditate on and talk about them.

3.2.1. Thinking about God

*“What does it mean to say ‘God’? Many today would have to answer this question as St. Augustine did when asked for a definition of time: ‘When I am not asked I know very well, but when I am asked I do not know at all!’”*⁴⁶

Thinking about God and contemplating His character have characterised Christians all through the centuries of Church history. Thinking about God often became academic and disconnected from real life. That is why many believing Christians question the meaning and purpose of theology and its place in spiritual life of a lay person.

Theology was once called “the queen of sciences” in old medieval universities. It was considered to be the key unlocking the doors to every realm of human thinking and activity. It was also considered to be a very complex and sophisticated exercise. Only the well trained and those with a special spiritual calling were supposed to understand it and take part in learned debates.

It was actually not only theology but also God’s Word, the Bible, that belonged only in the hands of the educated clergy. The mostly illiterate, common people were left with the pictures on the church walls and the sacraments - 'verbis visibilia', visible words.

The Reformation, with contributions from the Renaissance and the improvements in science and technology, revolutionised this understanding of theology. William Tyndale, Martin Luther, Erasmus of Rotterdam, among others, tried to bring the Bible to the lay people who came to the church each Sunday morning. Theology - reading the Word and prayerfully contemplating it - was no longer

⁴⁴ Alister McGrath: *Evangelicalism and the Future of Christianity*, Hodder & Stoughton, London, England, 1994, pp. 34-37.

⁴⁵ J.I. Packer: *Knowing God*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1973, p. 6.

⁴⁶ J.I. Packer: *Knowing Christianity*, Eagle, Guildford, England, 1995, p. 33

considered to be solely a scholastic intellectual exercise, but an important matter of everyday Christian life.

A distinctive mark of evangelicals is their stress on a personal, experiential understanding of Scripture:

“It is no dead orthodoxy, but a living faith. Scripture is treated as far more than a theological source; it is the basis of Christian living and devotion, personal and corporate.”⁴⁷

Due to the previously mentioned fragmented history of Central Europe during the last 100 years, and a general lack of rootedness in the broader historic context, there is no solid tradition of evangelical theological education in Slovakia. Most evangelical pastors have studied abroad, bringing back with them a mixture of theological influences. The attempts to set up theological or mission seminaries were broken down in their early stages by wars or totalitarian regimes. The Theological and Mission Seminary of Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica, set up in 1992, is the first evangelical theological school in Slovakia.

Evangelical theology, put into the context of our postcommunist postmodern culture, needs to be rediscovered. There are many young people who became Christians in evangelical communities, but in their search for a profound knowledge of God and deeper spirituality ended up in the Roman Catholic Church. Although we sometimes find it hard to accept the main reason for this trend is a perceived lack of theological and spiritual depth in evangelical churches. Some would even say a superficial and simplistic approach to Christianity is the typical characteristic of our evangelicalism. We often tend to think all that is needed is a simple message of the Gospel, communicated in a popular form, using advanced technology, media and rhetorical skills. But most people are actually looking for something that is deep, profound and at the same time “makes sense”, for something that would challenge their minds and touch their hearts. It is nothing new. Deep spirituality together with the humble but joyful reading of Scripture and meditating upon it is at the roots of evangelical Christianity. The stories and writings of people like John Wesley, Jonathan Edwards, by the Pietists and the Puritans, by Luther or Calvin, together with modern writers, such as J. I. Packer, John Stott, or C.S. Lewis might help us in our recovery of the depths of the knowledge of God in our times.

3.2.2. The Mystery of the Trinity

“And the Catholic Faith is this: That we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity. Neither confounding the Persons: not dividing the Substance. For there is one Person of the Father: another of the Son: and another of the Holy Spirit. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, is all one: the Glory equal, the Majesty coeternal. Such as the Father is: such is the Son: and such is the Holy Spirit. The Father uncreated: the Son uncreated: and the Holy Spirit uncreated. The Father incomprehensible: the Son incomprehensible: and the Holy Spirit incomprehensible. The Father eternal, the Son eternal, and the Holy Spirit eternal. And yet they are not three eternals, but one eternal.”⁴⁸

The doctrine of the Trinity has not been officially questioned by any of the evangelical streams. It is considered to be a part of the message of the Bible with its theological authority. The problem comes if we ask why is it so important.

Current evangelical churches react to the 'dead religion' of traditional denominations by stressing the need of personal salvation through the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, followed by

⁴⁷ Alister McGrath: *Evangelicalism and the Future of Christianity*, Hodder & Stoughton, London, England, 1994, p. 52.

⁴⁸ *The Athanasian Creed*, quoted from Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, IVP, Leicester, Great Britain, 1994, p. 1170.

life in the Spirit. Most sermons are about these important topics. Evangelism is usually understood as clear and simple communication of the message of personal salvation.

What is often missing is the Trinity: the Triune God, the Creator, the Author of life, the Redeemer, the God Incarnate, the Counsellor, the Judge. The God who is Three in One, who is perfect in loving unity, perfect relationship. “*The name of the Trinity is Love*”⁴⁹, as a thoughtful Christian philosopher said.

If we would ask an 'average Slovak evangelical' why the doctrine of the Trinity is so important and what are its implications in daily life, we might find him or her without an adequate answer. The doctrine of the Trinity, together with the doctrine of the two natures of Christ, is a fundamental doctrine, rooted in the Bible, formulated by the Church Fathers and shared by all orthodox Christians. It might be worthwhile to look at it again and re-discover this key Christian doctrine for our generation. Because “*the Trinity is a divine mystery without parallel*”⁵⁰, as J.I. Packer remarked.

3.2.3. Fascinated By God

During a meeting of church planters, the participants discussed the possible ways of arranging worship services in a newly planted church. The discussion came to the point when the purpose of worship services was debated. Some thought their main purpose is to encourage believers in their faith, others thought the primary purpose of 'God's services', is evangelism - communicating the Gospel to non-Christians. When one of the participants asked “Isn't the main purpose of our worship services to worship God?”, most of these leading members of an evangelical denomination did not know what to say. For some of them it was a completely new concept.

It may be just a problem of language, but only very few Christians would say they are fascinated by God, that they “enjoy him forever”.

Christian meetings are often filled by an organisational and administrative agenda, or with the “human side” of our relationship with God. Evangelistic campaigns are often concentrated on “the decision” of an evangelised individual.

It is interesting that the question which upset the most people in our survey was: *What are your questions about God?* More than half of the respondents did not know what to say - they apparently did not understand the question. The TMS⁵¹ students, interviewing some members of their congregations were often faced with the following reactions:

“What do you mean by 'questions about God'?”

“I should not have any questions about God [now, 10 years after I accepted Christ as my personal Saviour], should I?”

“Do you mean doubts? Isn't this a heretical question?”

Some of them actually said they do not have any questions about God. One respondent put it very clearly:

“All my questions concerning God are answered.”

How different from the following statement:

⁴⁹ Daniel Pastirčák, pastor of Cirkev bratska in Bratislava, in private conversation.

⁵⁰ J.I. Packer: *Theism for Our Time, the God Who is Rich in Mercy*, ed. Peter T. O'Brien and David G. Peterson, Baker, Grand Rapids, USA, 1986, p. 20.

⁵¹ The Theological and Mission Seminary of Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica, set up in 1992, is the first evangelical theological school in Slovakia.

“As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?”⁵²

Maybe the author of this psalm lacked something our respondent naturally has. Or (and this is far more probable), we, evangelicals in Slovakia, are missing something important - a fascination with God and an honest search for Him.

“There are leaders in various Christian circles who know so much about the things of God that they will offer to answer every question you may have. We can hope to answer questions helpfully as far as we can. But there is a sense of divine mystery running throughout all of the kingdom of God - far beyond the mystery that scientists discover running throughout the kingdom of nature. There are those who pretend to know everything about God - who pretend they can explain everything about God, about His creation, about His thoughts and about His judgements. They have joined the ranks of the evangelical rationalists. They end up taking the mystery out of life and the mystery out of worship. When they have done that, they have taken God out as well.”⁵³

3.3. Church After Communism

In this chapter we will look more closely at the Slovak church as it is now, seven years after the fall of communism. Religious freedom, sometimes an idea that was only dreamed about, is now reality. There is no political or social pressure on those believing in God. On the contrary - it is favourable to believe in God. How does the church cope with this changed situation? How does this affect preaching, authority structures and worship styles? What are the attitudes to foreign missionaries coming to Slovakia and what is their contribution to the life of the Slovak church?

3.3.1. Preaching

Preaching, as the key element in our worship services, has been recognised as a mark of evangelical pastors⁵⁴. While Roman Catholics have 'priests', Lutheran and Reformed have 'pastors' ('farar' in Slovak), Evangelicals have 'preachers' ('kazatel' in Slovak). That means the main ministry of an 'evangelical minister' has historically been to preach.

How do Evangelical preachers handle their main responsibility? Or is something else actually expected from them?

“What do you expect from your preacher?” was one of the questions in our survey that most of the respondents eagerly wanted to answer. Here are some representative answers:

- *“He should not always be busy when I have a problem and would like to talk to him.”*
- *“He should be a natural authority, with a genuine concern for people.”*
- *“He does not need theological education. He needs the gifts of the Spirit and a vision for the future.”*
- *“He should be our shepherd. He should lead and unite us.”*
- *“He should improve discipline in our church and keep the church firmly in his hands.”*
- *“He should preach sermons that would help me to develop biblical attitudes about what is going on in our society. He should also inspire vision for the church and help to solve the problems in the church and in families.”*

⁵² Bible, Psalm 42

⁵³ A.W. Tozer: *Whatever Happened To Worship*, STL Books and Kingsway Publications, Bromley, Great Britain, 1986, p. 58

⁵⁴ Ministers in evangelical churches are in both the Czech and Slovak languages actually called 'preachers'. Only recently the title 'pastor' is sometimes used, largely as a result of American influence.

Out of many interesting answers only three touched on the preaching as such. Most of the respondents expected *pastoral ministry* and *church administration* from their preachers/pastors. Interpreting this shift from preacher to pastor we come to the following observations:

- *A shift in the culture and felt needs.* In the Eastern European socialist culture, preaching - usually understood as an emotional appeal aimed at encouraging and uplifting the listeners - was more common and, generally, considered as the most important ministry of (not only) Christian leaders. By the end of the 1980s, 'relationship' became one of the most frequent words in Christian communities in Slovakia. This 'shift of importance' took place not only in the Church - it was typical for the whole of society with its general culture. It is only natural that a leader in a local church is expected to meet the needs his fellow believers feel.
- *Scepticism about preaching.* The history of the evangelical movement in Central Europe was, to a great extent, the history of a reaction towards dead rituals and cold theology in mainline churches. Rationally clear and emotionally uplifting sermons were the strong tools of old evangelical preachers. In the second half of the 20th century the now already traditional (as opposed to charismatic) evangelical churches often ended up in another extreme - preaching that came closer to dry speeches presented at a public gathering⁵⁵. As a result of this it is not uncommon to hear young Christians saying: "*We do not believe in preaching! It does not really matter what pastor says from the pulpit, what counts is real life.*". Could it be that one reason they do not believe in it is that they have not often heard proper preaching?
- *Misunderstood role of preaching.* Many sermons people hear in evangelical churches are either teaching on a specific subject or a Bible text, or - more often - a list of things one must and must not do, or exercises in story telling. While both of these are important and have their place in the church, preaching is, or should be something different. Preaching should stimulate the hearts and minds of those who listen to a deep, profound and genuine worship of God. It does not matter what the form of a 'homilia' is, if it does not bring the audience closer to worship of the great, omnipotent, omniscient, good and loving God, it misses its point.

*"Certainly there is no employment more honourable; more worthy to take up a great spirit; more requiring a generous and free nurture, than to be the messenger and herald of heavenly truth from God to man, and by the faithful word of holy doctrine to procreate a number of faithful men, making a kind of creation like to God, by infusing his likeness into them to their salvation, as God did into him; arising to what climate he may turn him, like the Sun of righteousness that sent him, with healing in his wings, and new light to break in upon the chill and gloomy hearts of hearers, rising out of darksome barrenness a delicious and fragrant spring of saving knowledge and good works."*⁵⁶

There are very few pastors/preachers able to inspire their congregations in worship of God by a relevant, though profound exposition of the Bible in Slovakia. Being a pastor in an evangelical church is primarily connected with administrative and organisational work. The 'busyness' of those who are supposed to give more time to studying Bible and meditating upon it is a common reality.

⁵⁵ Some of our non-Christian friends used to say that the atmosphere of the evangelical church services they attended reminded them political meetings - everybody dressed up, dry atmosphere, long boring speeches, etc.

⁵⁶ Milton, in: *Charles Bridges: The Christian Ministry*, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, Great Britain, 1983, p. 191

3.3.2. Worship styles

“I am of the opinion that we should not be concerned about working for God until we have learned the meaning and the delight of worshipping Him. God is trying to call us back to that for which He created us - to worship Him and to enjoy Him for ever!”⁵⁷

“If you cannot worship the Lord in the midst of your responsibilities on Monday, it is not very likely that you were worshipping on Sunday!”⁵⁸, said Dr. A.W. Tozer more than 30 years ago. Although most good Christians come to church each Sunday morning, is the worship of God what they expect and, indeed, what they experience?

According to our survey most evangelicals, coming to church on Sunday morning, expect:

- worship of God;
- preaching of the Word;
- community of Christians and mutual support;
- personal encouragement, stimulation, exhortation;
- preaching the Gospel to unbelievers.

When asked how they feel about the worship services they attend, the single most frequent response was that “it varies”, i.e. sometimes it is better, sometimes worse, usually depending upon who preaches.

The remaining respondents were either very positive (deep, profound, touching, interesting, understandable, joyous) or very negative (boring, shallow, ridiculous, missing the point, superficial, empty).

One response is worth quoting:

“I have a feeling the worship services have a higher priority than God for most people. They come on Sunday morning to satisfy their religious needs. And that is all. They don't want to go any further.”

From these observations we can assume there are right expectations about worship, but they are often not fulfilled in reality. The situation has not improved by the introduction of 'worship songs'⁵⁹ in recent years. Worship songs were usually initiated by groups of devoted young Christians who lacked the 'worship element' in traditional evangelical services. These groups were (some of them still are) faced by the suspicious attitudes of more 'traditionally minded' church members. This resulted either in a compromise (worship songs before the traditional service) or in a split with some of the most committed young people leaving the church.

The problem of 'worship songs' is interesting. It was often interpreted as the problem of a style of music. The real issue was the fear of a charismatic influence in traditional evangelical denominations. *“Often everything that is different is considered to be 'charismatic’”*, said a leader of a worship team in an evangelical church interviewed during our survey.

Many churches have a 'worship introduction' in their services now. The desire to worship God is still not fulfilled for many evangelicals.

Going to church has been almost equal to being a believer for Slovak evangelicals. Regular attendance of church services and church events is still considered to be a mark of spiritual health.

⁵⁷ A.W. Tozer: *Whatever Happened To Worship*, STL Books and Kingsway Publications, Bromley, Great Britain, 1986, p. 13-14

⁵⁸Tozer, p. 8

⁵⁹ In most Slovak churches, 'worship songs' refers to newly introduced songs from abroad with simple, easy to sing melodies and repetitive lyrics. These songs, even in Slovak, are referred to by the English word, 'worship'.

What do we get when we come to church? Are we inspired to give glory to God, or are we merely performing our religious duties?

3.3.3. Authority

In the authoritarian cultures of Eastern Europe the role of the pastor is naturally connected with a position of strong authority in his community. This might be the result of traditional Slovak culture, with its prevailing Roman Catholic emphasis on hierarchy, together with a hierarchical system imposed on the church by the communist government. The 'preacher-centred' model⁶⁰ of church, has been criticised by 'progressive' groups and informal movements in some denominations at least since the beginning of the 1980s. This model is still deeply embedded in evangelical communities.

Is it possible that some pastors (usually supported by boards of elders) tend to see themselves as managers of an organisation, trying to keep their flock under control? This might sometimes result in a withdrawal of stronger personalities from the church and a general suspicion of the church establishment by younger generation.

3.3.4. Organisation and Structure

In the course of our research we attended several meetings of church planters of a Slovak evangelical denomination. The meetings were supposed to help the participants in their effort to spread the Gospel and develop local communities where new believers could grow. Most of the time spent at these meetings was given to the organisational side of the whole process. The issues included registration of a local church, church membership, and how many members should a church have before it starts regular Sunday services. We talked about vision statements, planning, strategies...

Questions about the content of the Gospel and how we understand it, or about what it means to worship God, were not addressed. There was no discussion about the values of the new church. All this was assumed but one got the impression that a newly planted church was expected to just be a copy of the existing one.

There seems to be an undue emphasis given to the organisational side of church life. We are probably putting too much hope in organisation and structure. It might be due in part to the impact of a modern business culture mixed with the traditional hierarchy of society as we knew it under communism. While proper organisation and management are very important - and we still have a lot to learn - they are not the primary solution to the problems and challenges we face. Planting a church in every town, organising a professionally prepared evangelistic event, or implementing a new method of church administration could be helpful, but it will not solve our basic problems. Neither organisational effort, nor numerical strength will guarantee profound spiritual impact on our society.

We should heed the warning of Dr. Tozer:

*“Our gains are mostly external and our losses wholly internal; and since it is the quality of our religion that is affected by internal conditions, it may be that our supposed gains are but losses spread over a wider field.”*⁶¹

3.3.5. Attitudes to missions

“I feel strange when I see missionaries who think they are giving so much, but do not want to become one of us.”

⁶⁰ This is a technical term, often used by Slovak evangelicals in the 1980s, describing a local church strictly controlled by its pastor, who is, in this case, the only one doing all of the preaching, teaching, pastoral care, etc..

⁶¹ A.W. Tozer: *The Knowledge of the Holy*, STL Books and Kingsway Publications, Bromley, Great Britain, 1987, p. 8

“It is a pity when excellent local preachers are just interpreters for Americans whose preaching is much worse.”

“Foreign missionaries often behave as if they are bringing the Gospel to a pagan, 'unreached' society; they ignore our culture and religion.”

These are some of the responses from evangelical pastors when they were asked about their experiences with foreign missions in Slovakia. Although they agreed on some outstanding examples of foreigners helping the local church, the prevailing feelings were generally negative.

Some reasons for this negative assessment are definitely caused by historical ignorance and cultural insensitivity as well as inappropriate activities of foreign missionaries. They usually come without the necessary knowledge of the history, culture and language. They often come with simplistic ideas about evangelistic efforts and co-operation with the Church - which is not always sure what to do with them. Another problem is caused by the fact that local churches are not always completely honest in their opinions with foreigners, not wishing to offend. This leads to miscommunication as foreigners often understand the open hospitality as acceptance of their plans. Often foreigners are mostly 'full-time missionaries' while most of the people they work with or try to reach have their jobs and broader families, and as such are not available when missionaries need them. As a result of this some end up to be more of a burden than a help.

Another reason for these negative perceptions might be the disappointment caused by high expectations placed on foreign missions by local Christians. They were often expected to bring a major breakthrough in evangelism and discipleship, a revival of passive church members, together with substantial help in teaching, youth work, etc.. They were supposed to be always available, always open to visitors, always helping. And they were supposed to bring money with them. These idealistic expectations could hardly be met and disappointments followed.

Positively mentioned in our interviews, was the fact that foreign missionaries have challenged our local culture and stereotypes. Some of them have helped local churches to break through the mental walls around them. They are helping us to get rid of an inferiority complex which pervaded our communities under communism.

The initial enthusiasm as well as the disappointments in foreign missions seem to be over. The ones who came here with simplistic ideas or those who did not want to adapt to the complexities of the local culture, left. Those who stayed found their place and ministry in the context of the Slovak church and culture. They help Slovaks to see their ministry in a broader framework.

3.4. Understanding of Personhood, Humanness and Relationships

“Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. And although they are closely connected, it is difficult to say which comes first.”⁶²

Understanding God should always be complemented by an honest understanding of ourselves. We have a tendency to underestimate the human side of our spiritual life. If somebody is sad or depressed we tend to see a spiritual problem behind it (which might often be true), neglecting the possible psychological or relational reasons for such states of mind.

Many members of our communities have deep problems with their self-esteem. If church is the place where substantial healing⁶³ should take place, we probably should pay more attention to our understanding of personhood, humanness and personal relationships.

⁶² The opening sentence of the 1559 edition of John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.

3.4.1. Care, Concern and Intrusion

'Brother' and 'sister' are official titles we evangelicals use to refer to our fellow believers. It is based on the profound biblical idea that in Christ we are God's children and members of one family. These familial expressions have become an integral part of the formal language we use in church. From a statement of deep personal relationship these labels have come to take on the role of an official title. But what is the quality and depth of relationships in evangelical communities? Based on our survey we made the following observations:

- *A need for deeper relationships.* Three out of four respondents in our survey are not satisfied with relationships in the church. Most of them think there is something seriously wrong in this area. Some respondents said they cannot talk about really deep issues with the brothers and sisters from their church. Many relationships in the church tend to be only superficial, religiously pretending a depth that in reality is not there.
- *Lack of respect for one's individuality.* Each person needs a certain space around him or her - relational as well as physical. Each person is protected by a complex set of psychological, emotional and behavioural boundaries - "holy ground", that should not be violated. These boundaries are different for different people, nobody is without them. It is so because God created men and women as free and responsible individuals, able to develop deep personal relationships without a denial of their own personality. Intrusion into the privacy of, especially, young people in the church is not rare. There is strong social pressure to mould young people as well as new believers according to a unified pattern, often created by previous generations. Shame is often used to force patterns of behaviour which should really come through the development of a love for God and a desire to please Him.
- *A danger of emotional manipulation.* The previous point leads us to an often perceived, but rarely articulated threat of emotional and even spiritual manipulation in the church. One respondent of our survey said that "*the ethics of polite behaviour is often destroyed by phrases such as 'In the name of Lord Jesus I ask you...' , or 'You have to do this or that for God's love...' . People have reservations against this kind of language. Isn't that a kind of subtle manipulation?'*".
- *Freedom to choose.* Christian leaders often use the term 'sheep stealing' to describe the activity of one denomination resulting in a 'transfer of loyalty' of church members from one denomination to another. There is a hidden assumption in this term: that people are like sheep - easily 'stolen' from one sheep pen and 'put' into another. It betrays a manipulative attitude of some evangelical leaders to their 'flock'.

In spite of these critical observations, personal relationships and genuine concern for each other are still recognised as marks of evangelical Christianity. It is often the personal care and relationships that makes these communities attractive to non-Christians or members of mainline denominations.

3.4.2. Honesty, Anxiety, and Fear

C.S. Lewis once remarked that hypocrisy is a specifically "Christian sin". Those who are aware of their own sinfulness and confronted with the values of Kingdom of God, those who know they should

⁶³ We owe the term "substantial healing" to Francis Schaeffer. By substantial healing he meant the healing of our hurting emotions and perverted minds that is not yet complete, but it not insignificant either. Our relationship with the living God in a community of Church substantially heals the wounds caused by sin. The healing will be completed only when we are with Christ in heaven.

For a thoughtful analysis of the Church as the place of substantial healing, see F. Schaeffer: *The God Who Is There*, and F. Schaeffer: *The Church at the End of the 20th Century*.

bear the fruit of Spirit and grow in their character - they have the strongest temptations to hide their imperfections, doubts or failures. This might create unbearable psychological and spiritual pressures, leading to haunting anxieties and fear.

We talked about these issues with the pastors and respondents of our survey. Here are three of the most outstanding observations:

- *A fear of being judged by the church community.* Most evangelical communities in Slovakia, small as they are, sociologically remind one of a village. Nothing can be easily covered up, everybody knows and is watched by everybody else. Anyone who does something wrong or strange is strongly criticised by others. This kind of criticism is usually not far from sharp judgement. “*What would people in the church say if ...*”, is a strong motive behind many of our acts and decisions. More than a few Christians say they can share their frustrations and failures with their fellow students or colleagues at work, but they would not even think of sharing them with fellow believers. They are afraid of being judged. This 'feeling' and fear of being judged does not allow the freedom necessary for the new convert to explore the faith. Honest questions get fearful judgement instead of honest answers.
- *'Niceness' preferred before honesty.* One young Christian told me she can always tell a “religious” from a “normal” TV program before anything explicit is said. “*Everybody is too nice to be true.*”, she said. Maybe it is a desire to attract people to hear the Word of God, maybe it is our natural tendency to look better than we really are. We do not like statements like “I don’t know.”, or “I am not doing well.” We prefer to pretend we are all right, we prefer to look nice. The Christian press is a good example: One has to search very carefully to find a polemical article or letter to the editor.
- *“Spiritual” justifications of fear and anxiety.* The anxiety by pastors that their church would get out of hand, which leads to busyness, emotional distress or legalism, is often misunderstood as obedience to their God-given responsibility for the flock. Is not the manipulative attachment of some Christian parents to their children often motivated by fear of losing control of their lives and decisions?

Issues of fear and anxiety have started to be recognised by the evangelical community. Some books on counselling, relationships, anxiety and communication have been published⁶⁴, courses on pastoral care are occasionally organised, psychology is occasionally studied from a biblical perspective⁶⁵.

3.4.3. Freedom and Space for Growth

Love and concern for others are among the most important values of evangelicals. An average evangelical local church has about 50 members (those who regularly attend services), usually belonging to three or four main - extended and intermarried - families. In such small communities genuine concern may easily become an unwelcome intrusion into the space one needs for personal growth.

Everybody needs to feel free to be himself or herself without being afraid of losing the acceptance of the community of which he or she is a part. Each generation of young people in the church has to go through the struggle for freedom of their own style of clothes, haircuts, or music; actually their own way of life. To win the battle has not always been easy. Spiritual arguments of the highest calibre were often used. One could have been accused of a desire to “imitate the world” instead the Lord, or of being possessed by a demon (a book saying rhythmical music comes from the Devil is still in wide

⁶⁴ See the books by Larry Crabb, Paul Tournier and Jaro Koivohlavý, published by the Czech publisher Návrat Domov.

⁶⁵ See the interesting work of Albin Masaryk of Theological and Mission Seminary of Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica

circulation). There are numerous stories of new Christians who converted and, in order to protect their privacy and personal freedom, could no longer come to an evangelical church because of immense pressure to succumb and accept its habits and culture.

Biblical exhortations to love one another are often misunderstood as an unlimited possibility to manipulate each other. One needs space for growth and the freedom to grow - and even make mistakes. It is often difficult for Christian parents to accept this. Being responsible for my children does not mean they are my possession. They are supposed to grow and become independent of me; they are supposed to make their own decisions - and be responsible for them. Many children of Christian parents become good and obedient church members, not many of them become responsible vision-carriers, with enough courage and creativity to make their own decisions and mistakes.

3.4.4. A Lack of Generational Understanding

A lack of understanding between "parents and children", between older and younger generations, is too specific a problem to be described in this paper. We decided to deal with it because of the number of times the issue was raised during our research. It so common that it is considered to be a necessary part of our life. We believe that with the necessary respect and honour it does not need to be like that.

i) The Younger Generation - perception without wisdom

The younger generation always tend to be critical of the way of life of their parents. This criticism is often based upon an insufficient understanding of the times they lived in. It has only been 6 years since the fall of communism and it is sometimes hard to imagine the atmosphere of a 'normalised' communist society. How can we then understand something that took place some fifty years ago?

Young people do not understand the history of their parents. Not only public (social and political) history, but primarily personal history. Without understanding the questions they had to deal with, the pressures and temptations they had to resist, without understanding their dreams, hopes, fears and anxieties, we see only a caricature of the older generation. We then tend to be judgmental and severe. Our lack of understanding prevents us from learning from the rich resources of experience, of victories and failures, of those who have been here before us. It would help us to gain wisdom - something we so much need for our own decisions and 'steps of faith'. Since many of us have not lived long enough to acquire such vast stores of wisdom, listening to those who have might be of great value.

ii) The Older Generation - wisdom without perception

The older generation, that is those who spent most of their active lives under the communist regime, find the last 7 years very unsettling. The previously unknown freedoms of movement and speech, increased possibilities of choice, the renewed importance of money and business - all of these make the world "more complicated than it used to be". Some would actually say "worse than it used to be" since they have to deal with issues they have never faced before.

The feeling of 'lostness' in a complicated world makes some older people bitter and very critical of their children. Some of them might perhaps feel their children are somehow 'worse' than they themselves were when they were young. They did not need so much money, they did not watch TV, they liked beautiful music, they were more decent. But in reality they never had to deal with the issues their children are facing and struggling with.

Instead of trying to understand, some older people might be tempted to look down on today's youth and judge them. While the older generation has experience and wisdom, the younger generation has the ability of perception. Those are two sides of the same coin. One generation cannot live with the other. We should recognise this and learn from each other.

3.5. Public and Private Spheres of Life - Christians and Society

In this chapter we will look at some aspects of the coexistence of Christian communities and society. The society that is, in one sense, around our churches, but of which we also are a part - whether we like it or not. Evangelicals are in a permanent and, probably, unavoidable, tension in their attitudes to the "world outside". On the one hand they give much of their time and energy to evangelism, to crossing the imaginary walls of their churches with the saving news of the Gospel. On the other hand they want to grow in holiness, in their intimate personal relationship with God - and by doing that foster those imaginary walls. On the following pages we will try to capture the essence and atmosphere of this tension.

3.5.1. Extended Families, Intermarriage

In reading the history of any small evangelical denomination one finds some family names repeated over and over. An observation by foreigners coming to Slovak churches is similar - everybody is related to everybody else.

This might be a result of the limited possibilities for church growth under communism, coupled with traditionally strong family ties in Slavic cultures. New people coming to evangelical churches might soon find themselves in a complex network of inter-related families with their common stories, common affinities and antipathies. It is difficult, if not impossible, for an outsider to penetrate into these 'family clans'.

Extended and inter-related families in the church provide a natural 'safety net' for needy ones. It is an appropriate, natural and very effective way of protecting a stable and healthy environment for children, as well as old people, if proper boundaries are set.

Extended church-families could, on the other hand, be a barrier in the process of personal growth. They might - with the best of intentions - limit the freedom, desired by and necessary for (not only) young people in the church. The protective environment is invaluable at a certain stage of life, but it might become a prison if there is not enough trust and sensitivity.

Extended church-families can occasionally become similar to power blocks lobbying parliament for their corporate interests. In some local churches it is impossible to become a member of the board of elders without the support of key church families. Some pastors have to be careful not to offend respected families or else they might find themselves under a merciless fire of criticism and gossip. It is worth examining if our family ties are in any way a hindrance to the spiritual development of the church.

These are probably natural features of any small community with close and intertwined relationships. Opening our small evangelical churches to the outside world - and there is no reason for them to stay closed anymore - might be a way out of this awkward situation.

3.5.2. Language and Clichés

“Clichés are commonly used statements, which, by being repeated too many times, have lost their deeper meaning. These are the “empty” words, or the very shallow and often only formal messages with which we communicate.”⁶⁶

In a seminar with young church workers actively involved in evangelism we tried a simple exercise: we asked them to list all of the Christian and religious clichés (words and phrases which have lost their original meaning and are unusable in communicating the Gospel) they could think of. The long

⁶⁶ Jaro Koivohlavý: *Povídej naslouchám*, Návrat Domu, Prague, Czech Republic, 1993, p.34.

list they made up included almost all of the religious phrases we use in the church, such as: “standing in the Lord”, “accepting Jesus as your personal Saviour”, or even “evangelism”, “worship”, “praise the Lord”. We then decided we would not use the words and phrases on this list during the whole seminar. We found that one has to be really creative and thoughtful to communicate the meaning of Christianity without using clichés. We also found out that it is possible without losing theological and spiritual depth.

Many of us who grew up in the evangelical community had to struggle with the problem of religious language. Each generation has to 're-define' it again if it wants to be really understood.

The experience of several evangelical pastors is that their church actually wants them to speak in the traditional language, to use familiar phrases. One pastor told us that he has been accused of not “preaching the Gospel” when he tried to use a more normal, i.e. non-religious, language.

3.5.3. Church Language as a Barrier to Church Expansion

During our research we had a discussion with a group of thoughtful non-Christians about their perception of Christianity and church. We talked about what comes to their minds when they hear the word “God”. They said many interesting things - from a medieval image of a “good-old God” to the very postmodern idea of God as a subjective projection of one's hopes and dreams. As we walked home one of them summed up the discussion in this way:

“You know, it doesn't have any meaning to talk about God in public. Christians profaned God by talking too much and too easily about Him. The words they use have no meaning anymore. 'God' is for me a 'late night idea' - I can think about God only when I am alone, when I'm not disturbed by anything else. I would not dare to think and even talk about Him publicly.”

This friend of mine captured what many of us sometimes feel. We, Christians, often use language our non-Christian environment cannot understand. Speaking of God and the Bible “too easily” might actually profane the message we want to communicate.

When a minority separates itself from the majority community it takes on its own language forms, idioms and style. The longer and more radical the separation is, the more different the minority language becomes. Attempts to communicate the message often fall short and end in frustration as one side blames the other for being “hard” or “closed”.

The only way to avoid this is to live among people, to be an open church, where outsiders do not feel judged and different, except on the level of morality, commitment to love and in radical humility - in these they should feel as different as possible.

“Our problem is that most of us who are Christians have been brought up bilingual. For most of our early lives, through the accepted systems of public education, we have been trained to use a language which claims to make sense of the world without the hypothesis of God. For an hour or two a week we use the other language, the language of the Bible. We are like the Christian congregations under the millet systems of the Persian and Muslim empires: we use the mother tongue of the Church on Sundays, but for the rest of our lives we use the language imposed upon us by the occupying power. But if we are true to the language of the Church and the Bible, we know that this is not good enough.”⁶⁷

⁶⁷ Leslie Newbiggin: *Truth to Tell: The Gospel as Public Truth*, SPCK, London, Great Britain, 1991, p. 49

3.5.4. Division between Sacred and Profane

A friend of mine used to draw a diagram depicting a common understanding of the relation between work and ministry⁶⁸. He made a timeline, starting at 6 a.m., ending at about 10 p.m., symbolising the time one has in a day. Many Christians living under communist regime perceived their lives as divided between two compartments: the time spent in their workplace (7.00-15.00) and the remaining time they had for “spiritual work”, for their ministry. Notice an important assumption: the time spent in one’s workplace was not considered to be “spiritual work”. What was it, then?

My friend is able to articulate what many evangelical Christians believe - that there is a big difference between the sacred and the profane activities in our life. Going to church must be considered 'more holy' than going to a movie, preaching must be a 'more blessed activity' than speaking at a political gathering, sharing the Gospel with an unbeliever must be more important than selling peaches at the marketplace.

This narrow view of ministry and the absence of a theology of calling are among the distinct features of evangelicals in Central and Eastern Europe. One can trace these attitudes back to their pietistic roots, although I would argue, to a misunderstood interpretation of pietistic tradition. It is true that Spener and Francke stressed spiritual experience and a holy life, but they were, at the same time, very active in public life, education, social work and even business. These kinds of activities were severely limited under communism. That led several generation of Christians to a limited, distorted view of Christian ministry. A ministry that starts after office hours.

The division of life into secular and profane compartments is not in line with the legacy of historic biblical Christianity, especially not with its Protestant expression. If God is the Creator and Ruler of the whole world, if there is no place where His sovereignty is limited; if the Gospel really is the good news about the renewed relationship between God and His creation, then there is no profane activity, no “non-sacred” area of our lives.

3.5.5. Prevailing Attitudes to Christian Involvement in Society

The prevailing attitudes of evangelicals in Slovakia to their involvement in society could be, according to our survey, divided into the following groups:

- *Radical non-involvement.* Some are still convinced Christians should not be actively involved in politics⁶⁹ and public life in general. According to our interviews with evangelical leaders and laymen, this group is much smaller (about 10% of respondents) than it used to be some five years ago, and is still shrinking. The conviction of these people is based on a somewhat narrow understanding of the gospel (limited to Jesus as personal saviour) and holiness (an old 'monastic' idea of withdrawal from the complexities of life into a safe spiritual fortress). It does not take into consideration the fact of Jesus' lordship and sovereignty over the whole created life - in all its dynamics and complexity.
- *Cautious involvement.* The most frequent attitude among Slovak evangelicals is that *some Christians* should be actively involved in *some sort of politics*. *Some Christians* usually means those with a specific calling, gifts, strengths, etc.. *Some politics* means, for example, local politics, any involvement that does not lead to ethical compromises, that does not weaken one's relationship with God, that does not violate Christian principles, etc.. There is an assumption that politics is a problematic area, that it is an 'optional extra' for a Christian, that it is more corrupt and belongs to this world more than any other area of life.

⁶⁸ This illustration was first brought to my attention by Milan Čičel of Integra Foundation.

⁶⁹ We use the term "active politics" to describe any active, intentional involvement in political life. We are aware that it is impossible to live in a modern State without being part of its public life. Everything we do has a public, that is "political" dimension.

- Radical involvement. About 25% of the respondents in our survey believe Christians should be actively involved in politics. Their main reason is that Christians should be, in principle, involved in every area of life - with respect to their specific gifts and calling, of course. Politics is a part of a normal life and to be a witness of the living God means not only to talk about it, but also to follow the values and principles of the Kingdom in every area of human activity. Not to do it would mean to fall short of God's general calling to be stewards of this world, to be salt and light.

One respondent said that in their church they have a principle that pastors should not be involved in politics by, for example, being members of a political party. They encourage their members, though, to “bring the Gospel there [i.e. to politics] on the condition that it will not harm their spiritual life. In church they regularly pray for sportsmen and people in high positions”.

What this shows, and it is a common attitude, is that:

1. people believe in a higher and a lower spiritual calling, i.e. there is a difference between a pastor and a laymen;
2. the strange area of politics is a mission field, Christians may go and witness there;
3. this witnessing is a dangerous one - it might threaten the spiritual life of the witness;
4. the activity of Christians should be limited to a 'pure preaching of the Gospel' - they should not get involved in the complex and difficult reality of those they are trying to reach;
5. the goal of this activity, supported by prayers is that famous personalities would convert (and eventually become members of their denomination) and this would be a 'great testimony' for hesitating or resistant seekers.

Reviewing our own assumptions about involvement in public life might help us to see to what extent they are really based on the values and principles of the Kingdom of God and to what extent did we take for granted the assumptions forced upon us by a communist ideology.

3.5.6. Separation from the Non-Christian World; Modern Monasticism

The relationship between the church and the world around it has been the topic of heated discussions, and polemics since the early church. The tension, inherent in “being in the world, but not of the world” led some to withdrawal and others to vigorous activity in the culture and society.

An early expression of this tension in the history of church was the rise of monasticism in the third century. Here is a pattern we find repeated many times - up to our own days.

Monastic movements started when Christianity rapidly spread in the Mediterranean region and North Africa. Christians in the first two centuries had the reputation of having a strong character, a strong faith, in spite of suffering and martyrdom. As more people were becoming Christians, the lower the moral standards of the 'average Christian'. It had become easier to identify with the church. The number of 'nominal Christians' was growing. Some churches showed dangerous signs of formalism.

There was a growing number of people who had a desire for nothing short of perfection. In order to live a holy life they decided to withdraw from 'sinful society' and devote themselves to spiritual disciplines - prayer, fasting, meditation. From the very beginning there were many forms of monasticism but they had several distinct common features:

- withdrawal from society - “monasteries arose in part from disgust with city life, with its dust, crowds, noise and moral corruption”⁷⁰;
- the desire for a perfect Christian life;

⁷⁰ Kenneth Scott Latourette: *A History of Christianity, Volume 1*, HarperCollins, San Francisco, 1975, p. 225.

- strong legalism - the assumption that salvation can (and actually should) be earned and deserved;
- a belief that flesh and matter are evil;
- strong and rigid authority structures with strict obedience to superiors;
- strong missionary zeal;⁷¹
- escape from civic obligations;
- division of Christians into two classes: (1) the ones aspiring to perfection and (2) those content to compromise.⁷²

Is it possible that some of these characteristics of the monastic movement of the third century could be almost directly applied to the Slovak evangelicals living at the end of the 20th century?

To “be in the world, but not of the world” has never been easy. It was not only monks and nuns who tried to solve this task by retreating into safe havens, isolated from the complexities of secular societies. Evangelicals in postcommunist Slovakia feel the same temptation. Resisting it does not result in a “heavenly harmony” or sentimental holiness. It often leads to tensions and ambiguity. But is there any other way?

3.6. Summary

In this section we looked at five areas of our Christian life. One tendency was typical for all of them: We tend to forget the content, while at the same time anxiously keeping the form.

- *We are not sure what makes one 'an evangelical', but we use the label anyway.*
- *We rarely experience deep, humble fascination with the triune God, but we speak easily about Him and sing songs that use the language but lack depth.*
- *Our spiritual need to worship God and enjoy Him is rarely met in our churches, but we insist on keeping the strict tradition of the form of worship anyway.*
- *We feel the lack of space for personal growth, but we are afraid that our congregations might get out of our control.*
- *We are not sure how the liberating truth of the Gospel could be relevant in our complex situation, but we are afraid of involvement in the secular world and keep our evangelistic efforts simple and superficial.*

⁷¹ Although this was not a strong point of the first monastic orders, missionary activities were typical for monasticism through Christian history.

⁷² For a more detailed description of the rise of monasticism, see Latourette: *History of Christianity*, especially the chapter “Rise of Monasticism”.

4. The Future - Where Are We Going?

Knowing that our times - past, present and future - are firmly in the hands of God we will conclude this paper by two possible projections about the time to come. Both are based on our awareness of the past and observations about the present. Our awareness of the past is like an old mosaic with many stones missing, our observation of the present is like studying the dense Slovak forests by touching the trees and smelling flowers - an exciting and useful experience, but very frustrating if one wants to see the whole picture. In spite of the fragmented picture of the past and our subjective and partial knowledge of the present we will try to look towards a misty future.

Based on our observation of the past and present we will suggest possible trends in seven areas of life of the evangelical community in Slovakia:

1. *Spirituality and worship of God.* “For the reformers, spirituality concerned the personal and corporate response of believers to the gracious and personal activity of God, embracing virtually every aspect of life.”⁷³ Evangelicals in Slovakia should re-discover this spirituality. The experience of communism, more than anything else, limited our notion of spiritual life and worship of God. We tend to stay on the surface, we tend to succumb to the illusion that we completely 'understand God', our spiritual life is often without a sense of the mystery and awe of God. If our observations are correct, this has started to change in the last couple of years. There are groups of Christians in all evangelical denominations with a strong desire to worship God in an authentic, deep and profound way. This desire is not expressed in any typical 'worship style' - charismatic, meditative, or traditional. It goes much deeper. It re-emphasises the devotional and adorational aspect of our spirituality. These groups sometimes have tense relationships with the official church establishment, but most of the denominational leaders welcome this trend and support it.

2. *Theology.* I once stayed with an older Baptist couple in a small English town. He was a construction worker, she a housewife. In the living room was a bookshelf full of theological literature. They had thick volumes of the major works of theology, together with several books on Christian history. I made a nice remark about the books and my host started to show and read me his favourite passages from some of them. He not only had the books, he had actually read most of them. He was not a pastor or a theologian, he was a simple Christian. He was fascinated by thoughts about God, he had a desire to go deeper, to learn more. Evangelical theology is not just an occupation for scientists and quiet times for the rest. It is not only popular books and evangelistic tracts - although one might get that impression in some evangelical bookshops. Busy evangelical activists should be able to find time for thinking about God, for meditating on His law, for reading good books about God. We are not the first Christians in this world. There were many thoughtful men and women of God before us. We have the privilege to learn from them, it would be unwise not to use it. It is encouraging that after the initial boom of simple, popular books, Czech and Slovak Christian publishers now produce more and more high quality theological literature. Another important trend is a renewed emphasis on education. It is seen in the establishment and development of seminaries as well as in the recognised importance of a Christian presence in state and private schools.

3. *Christian community.* Evangelical churches should be more than weird religious groups with a strong 'minority complex'. They should be places of genuine concern for others, of deep relationships, of healthy freedom and space for personal growth. They should be growing organisms, not only properly managed organisations. Loyalty to Jesus Christ and faithfulness to the revealed truth should be of primary importance. Evangelical communities should be open to all seeking people, they should not be afraid of them. They should not pretend that their members are the only ones who understand the truth - they

⁷³ Alister McGrath: *Roots that Refresh*, Hodder & Stoughton, London, Great Britain, 1992, pp. 23-24

should be ready to listen and discern. Evangelical communities should also be communities where hurting people could be substantially healed. And evangelical communities should be communities of hope - knowing that the best is yet to come; communities of those deeply involved in the issues of this world, but focused on the 'eternal city' which is prepared for the faithful ones in heaven.

4. Understanding personhood and humanness. Although personal relationships were important in evangelical churches, a proper understanding of personhood was often missing. To think about the 'psychology' of our relationships, to think of 'personal needs' was often considered to be 'too worldly'. In the near future we might be tempted to go into the other extreme. Under the influence of the prevailing humanism in our society we might tend to reduce our perception of personhood to its psychological and sociological dimensions *only*, and thus lose the spiritual side of our beings. Neither of these extremes is right. We bear the image of God, while at the same time we are sons and daughters of Adam, that is from the dust of the earth. There is a great need for teaching on spiritual counselling and pastoral care in the Slovak evangelical community. We need to better understand ourselves, understand our past, our emotions, anxieties and frustrations. We also need to better understand the complex nature of relationships and personal needs. We cannot grasp this without humbly seeking the mind of our Creator, who knows us incomparably better than we know ourselves.

5. Sovereignty of God. *“Reformation spirituality is grounded in and orientated towards life in the everyday world, enabling Christians to involve themselves firmly and fully in the life of the secular order, while at the same time lending it new meaning and depth.”*⁷⁴ The biblical notion of the sovereignty of God over all (geographic, social and cultural) areas of life was very dear to reformers in the 16th century. Although an attempted withdrawal from this sinful world has been more typical for Slovak evangelicals, it is not true to the evangelical teaching and tradition. Evangelicals should be involved in all areas of life so that the message they communicate would be plausible, so that people would listen to them at all. Christian involvement in public life is not only a marketing strategy, or an optional extra for a small group of specially gifted ones. It is God's command. He is the sovereign ruler of this beautiful but broken world. It is not *any* involvement in public life that is expected from Christians, it is a *Christian* involvement. Christians should not just do the same as everybody else is doing, they should be able to add something specifically Christian to it - be it truth and honesty in politics, personal relationships and biblical ethics in business, or excellence and quality in the workplace. Wherever they are, Christians should bring the values of the Kingdom of God there. It often needs creativity, thinking and courage to be salt and light.

6. Evangelism and mission. Opportunities for evangelism and mission in a free postcommunist society are more numerous than those who lived under communism ever dreamed about. It is no surprise that individual Christians, churches and various Christian organisations try to put a lot of effort into evangelistic activities. The results have been smaller than expected. Much of this paper has been given to capturing the reasons for this situation. If we want to see change we need to change the way we understand evangelism. Evangelism should not only be seen as an activity we do at certain times and at certain places. Evangelism should be the way we live our lives - in open relationships with our non-Christian friends. We should try to understand their anxieties, and fears; we should try to give honest answers to honest questions. The best missionaries the church has are Christian workers, doctors, nurses, teachers, businessmen, artists, or politicians.

7. Church expansion in a non-believing society. Then there is a good chance that church will expand. By “expansion” we do not mean only a higher number of church members. We mean primarily a deeper knowledge of God, leading us to a need and desire to “glorify

⁷⁴ McGrath, p. 47.

Him and enjoy Him for ever”, as the old church catechism says. Nothing short of this will provide the meaningful and saving alternative for the people around us.

Christians in Slovakia - as well as everywhere in the world - should be “in this world but not out of this world”.

They should live in the “real world” and deal with its complex struggles - and not try to “cut it short” by only giving tracts to non-believers or sticking a “Jesus Loves You” sticker on their cars. A deep relationship with God and awe of His presence should permeate every area of their lives as a beautiful perfume, as salt and light.

They should be filled with hope that one day they will enter the glory and be in the presence of God for ever.

That is where we are going.

5. Appendices

5.1. Who Are Evangelicals

There is no single definition to which all evangelicals have to subscribe. There is no 'evangelical confession', or 'evangelical statement of faith'. We decided to quote several definitions of evangelicals and evangelicalism from leading scholars and writers.

*“At its heart, evangelicalism is historic Christian orthodoxy.”*⁷⁵

Kenneth Scott Laourette:

*“In whatever country or branch of Protestantism it appeared, the awakening had distinctive features. It was characteristically Protestant and stressed the authority of the Scriptures, salvation by faith alone, and the priesthood of all believers. It made much of a personal religious experience, of a new birth through trust in Christ, commitment to him, and faith in what God had done through him in the incarnation, the cross, and the resurrection. Indeed, some beliefs were so widely held by most of those touched by the awakening that the faith held by all came to be known technically as “Evangelical”. The awakening was intensely missionary. To employ technical terms, it was “evangelistic” and emphasised “evangelism”. It sought to win to an acceptance of the Gospel the nominal Christians and the de-Christianised in Christendom and non-Christians throughout the world. It endeavoured hopefully, in the words of the New Testament command, to “preach the Gospel to every creature”. A youth organisation which sprang from it late in the nineteenth century, the Student Movement for Foreign Missions, took as its “watchword”: “The evangelisation of the world in this generation.”*⁷⁶

Alister McGrath:

“Evangelicalism is based on a cluster of six controlling convictions, each of which is regarded as being true, of vital importance, and grounded in Scripture. These are not purely 'doctrinal', if this term is understood to refer merely to a set of objectively valid truths; they are also 'existential', in that they affirm the manner in which the believer is caught up in a redemptive and experiential encounter with the living Christ. These six fundamental convictions can be set out as follows:

- 1. The supreme authority of Scripture as a source of knowledge of God, and a guide to Christian living,*
- 2. The majesty of Jesus Christ, both as incarnate God and Lord, and as the saviour of sinful humanity.*
- 3. The lordship of the Holy Spirit.*
- 4. The need for personal conversion.*
- 5. The priority of evangelism for both individual Christians and the church as a whole.*
- 6. The importance of the Christian community for spiritual nourishment, fellowship and growth.”*⁷⁷

R.V. Pierard, in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*⁷⁸:

⁷⁵ Alister McGrath: *Evangelicalism and the Future of Christianity*, Hodder & Stoughton, London, England, 1994, p. 52.

⁷⁶ Laourette, p. 1019.

⁷⁷ McGrath, p.51.

⁷⁸ *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. by Walter A. Elwell, Marshall Morgan & Scott Publications Ltd., Basingstoke, Great Britain, 1985, pp. 279-382.

“The movement in modern Christianity, transcending denominational and confessional boundaries, that emphasises conformity to the basic tenets of the faith and a missionary outreach of compassion and urgency.”

Theological Meaning:

- *sovereignty of God, the transcendent, personal, infinite Being;*
- *Scripture as the divinely inspired record of God’s revelation, the infallible, authoritative guide for faith and practice;*
- *the Holy Spirit is required to bring out the divine meaning embedded in the text and to apply it to our lives;*
- *total depravity of man;*
- *Christ’s substitutionary atonement was a ransom for mankind’s sins, a defeat of the powers of darkness, and a satisfaction for sin because it met the demand of God’s justice;*
- *salvation is an act of unmerited divine grace received through faith in Christ, not through any kind of penance or good works;*
- *by grace believers are saved, kept, and empowered to live a life of service;*
- *the vehicle of God’s Spirit is the biblical proclamation of the Gospel which brings people to faith;*
- *life and word are inseparable elements of the evangelical message;*
- *expectation of the visible, personal return of Jesus Christ to set up his kingdom of righteousness, a new heaven and earth, one that will never end;*
- *it will consummate in judgement upon the world and the salvation of the faithful.*

“Evangelicalism is the affirmation of the central beliefs of historic Christianity.”

I.S. Rennie, in *New Dictionary of Theology*⁷⁹:

“Evangelical theology goes back to the creeds of the first centuries of the Christian era, in which the early church sought to correlate the teaching of Scripture, penetrate its meaning and defend it. In concert with the thought of this period, evangelical theology affirms that:

- *the Bible is the truthful revelation of God and through it the life-giving voice of God speaks;*
- *God is the almighty Creator and we are his dependent creation;*
- *God has entered history redemptively in the incarnation of Jesus Christ;*
- *God’s nature exists in Trinitarian expression;*
- *Jesus Christ is fully divine and fully human, the power and judgement of sin is a reality for all humanity;*
- *God graciously takes the initiative in coming to us savingly in Jesus Christ and by the Holy Spirit;*
- *Jesus Christ is building His church;*
- *the consummation of history will be expressed in the second advent of Jesus Christ, the general resurrection, the final judgement, heaven and hell.”*

5.2. Pietism

By the end of the Thirty Years’ War German Protestantism was in a deep crisis. The Lutheran Church was ruled by civil governments and autocratic theologians. Vigilance over doctrine was considered to be more important than care for Christian character. The result was, that “whilst orthodoxy was never more outwardly alive, it was never more inwardly lifeless”⁸⁰. Dogma, the proper theological doctrine, was given the place of ultimate importance. “A creed-bound Church neglected the Bible in home

⁷⁹ *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. by Sinclair B. Ferguson, David F. Wright, IVP, Leicester, England, 1988, pp. 239-240.

⁸⁰ James Hastings (editor): *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, vol. X, p. 6, T&T. Clark, New York, 1918

school, university and service”.⁸¹ In this environment and in reaction to these tendencies, Pietism arose.

Pietism, as introduced by Philipp Jakob Spener and August Hermann Francke, put the emphasis on practical spiritual life, Bible reading and personal piety. It was in 1670 in Frankfurt, when Spener first instituted his “Collegia Pietatis”, Bible study fellowships, meeting first in homes and then in church, aimed at helping their participants towards growth in piety and holy living. In 1675 he wrote his “Pia Desideria”, in which he stressed:

- the importance of earnest Bible study, conducted in small groups (called “ecclesiolae in ecclesia”, “church in the church”),
- emphasised the role of laymen in the Church government - the priesthood of all believers,
- practical knowledge of Christianity, shown in charity, forgiveness, and devotion,
- sympathetic treatment of unbelievers in order to win them to truth,
- the emphasis in theological education should be laid on devotion rather than on doctrine,
- preaching should be more practical and less rhetorical.

Philipp Jakob Spener was the godfather of Count Nicholas von Zinzendorf, who in 1722 gave land on his estate as a place of asylum for Moravian brothers (refugees from Catholic persecution in Czech lands). The resulting community was to be more than a refugee camp. Herrnhut (“the Lord’s Watch”, or “Ochranov” in Czech) became a “community of saints with a vital spiritual experience devoted to the furtherance of the Gospel throughout the world.”⁸² Moravian brothers from Ochranov had a significant influence on John Wesley and were at the roots of the Great Awakening in North America and the Methodist revival in England.

“I would gladly have spent my life here!”, wrote John Wesley in his journal when he visited Herrnhut in August 1738.

Thanks to its rapid spread in Europe, North America, Scandinavia, and even in Russia, “the Pietist Movement is today considered one of the most influential Protestant reform movements since the Reformation itself.”⁸³

Pietism was not without its problems, though. The most important was probably its tendency to *subjectivism*. One should remember that the Pietist Movement started as a reaction against the rigid theological scholasticism of the age. A tendency to overemphasise the subjective, usually emotional, perception and experience of the Gospel became more discernible with the passing of time. Emotional appeal, together with intellectual timidity (simplicity?) was to be a characteristic of (especially American) evangelicalism for many years to come.

This led inevitably to another problematic tendency of Pietism: *isolationism* - the emphasis on personal piety, as opposed to engagement with the sinful world. Although charitable concerns were an important part of the 'classic' Pietism of Spener and Francke⁸⁴, following generations of pietists tended to reduce their spiritual life to religious activities. “Life had to be religious or it was unspiritual.”⁸⁵ Any involvement in government, culture or philosophy was strongly discouraged.

Since Pietism initiated an unprecedented growth of world mission, the strengths and weaknesses of this movement spread rapidly to the whole world. Subjectivism and isolationism became typical characteristics of the evangelical Christianity that grew out of revivals in the 19th century. The

⁸¹ Hastings, op. cit., p.7

⁸² Ranald Macaulay: *The Pietist Roots of Evangelicalism Today*, in L’Abri Lectures, No. 1, L’Abri Fellowship, Greatham, England, 1991.

⁸³ Macaulay, op. cit.

⁸⁴ P.J. Spener set up a whole group of “Halle institutions”: orphanage, schools, bakery, bookshops, chemists, a college for oriental studies and even (what would later sound very worldly) a brewery.

⁸⁵ Macaulay, op. cit.

evangelical community in Slovakia is no exception. The dead orthodoxy and ritualism of Roman Catholic, Lutheran and Reformed churches led them to stress the importance of a holy life, subjective experience and, to some extent, isolation from the sinful world. All this was combined with a strong commitment to evangelism and mission and sympathy with 'the lost'. While recognising the crucial importance of these emphasises, it would be worthwhile to complement them by theological reflection about the broader (and deeper) legacy of the Reformation, especially in the area of spirituality and God's sovereignty over the whole world.

5.3. Postmodernism

*“Postmodernism is an incredulity towards meta-narratives.”*⁸⁶

If there is one sentence that captures the essence of postmodernism, it is this famous line of Jean Francois Lyotard, the most outstanding philosopher of postmodernism. But what does this statement actually mean? In this brief article we cannot go into a detailed description of postmodern philosophy, art, or social thinking. We will list only some features of the “postmodern situation” that most of us experience in our everyday lives.

- *Stories (narratives) are more plausible than propositional statements.* “Story” is one of the key words of postmodernity. While philosophers conveyed their thoughts in the form of thick books full of complex definitions, their postmodern colleagues tend to communicate in stories⁸⁷. Stories are usually not judgmental. The reader (another important postmodern word) is free to identify his own story with the one he hears or reads, or just ‘take it as a story’ - with no particular implications for his or her life. In any case, it is up to him or her to decide.

Stories are also the opposite of a fixed rationalistic perception of life. The life of an individual human being as well as of a nation or humankind is a story, or history, if you want. To understand somebody one should try to understand his or her story. To understand why people in the former Yugoslavia kill each other we have to go back to their history.

It is interesting to note that many evangelical apologists recognised this trend and some of them wrote novels instead of ‘theoretical’ books to communicate the same message. The author of *Evidence that Demands Verdict* chose the form of an easy-to-read novel with the title *Truth Slayers* and a dramatic picture of a scared teen-age girl in torn jeans and Adidas trapped against a scull-faced rock, in a mystical and stormy dark land, on the cover.

- *Small stories are more plausible than great ones.* “History will teach us nothing” is the title of a song by the prominent rock singer, Sting. Personal stories are considered to be more important than the 'great' history. “How things really happened” is not so important as “how did I experience it”.

'Meta-narratives' in Lyotard's sentence is anything that aims to explain everything. The most obvious meta-narratives are ideologies and religions. It could be said that the postmodern perception of life came as a reaction to blind religious and ideological fundamentalism and the atrocities caused by some their wild adherents. Instead of supporting an old ideology or creating a new one, postmodern people prefer a more humble attitude of reducing (deconstructing) the big picture to a set of personal or fictional stories. Plurality of these stories and tolerance to their great variety is assumed and highly praised.

- *Divergence is more plausible than compactness.* As a result of the deconstruction of the great stories which tried to explain everything, heterogeneity and divergence are an unavoidable part of reality. Reality is imagined as a mosaic consisting of stones of various colours and shapes, which only rarely and only in the mind of the observer come together into a bigger picture. Enjoyment of the variety of choices, life-styles, beliefs, ethical or

⁸⁶ Jean Francois Lyotard, *La situation postmoderne*. Edition de Minuit, Paris, 1979.

⁸⁷ See, for example, Umberto Eco. The best summary of his philosophical thinking is contained in his three fascinating novels (*The Name of Rose*, *Foucault's Pendulum*, *The Islands of Yesterday*)

aesthetic preferences in a non-judgmental way is preferable. A desire for a compact system is considered to be idealistic, even dangerous. It is nothing 'abnormal' to hold inconsistent, even contradictory views.

- *Tolerance is more plausible than comparisons.* Any comparison is based on a general assumption that something could be considered better (or worse) than something else. Any comparison - whether based on aesthetic, ethical, or religious principles is viewed with suspicion. Any comparison is relative and is understood more as a personal preference than an objective judgement. It should always be balanced by tolerance of what one does not like.

This suspicious attitude towards comparisons and judgements has its roots in the devastating experience with modern ideologies (fascism and communism) and religious fundamentalism, that pretended to have the only 'right answer' to each question.

It often seems like the only thing a postmodern person is intolerant about is tolerance. It is a profound expression of a "world without a centre", a world without absolutes, a world of "absolute relativism".

- *Plausibility is more plausible than truth.* Truth is one of the most ambiguous words in our current culture. In our everyday lives we often use it and we usually know what we mean by it. We read newspapers and magazines full of investigative articles aimed at nothing less than discovering, revealing, or defending the truth. But if we move to the world of ideas (or religion) we might find it very difficult to explain why we are convinced anything is true at all. The postmodern concept of truth is probably best captured by the American philosopher and populariser of postmodernism, Richard Rorty. He said "the truth is what wins in open and non-coercive encounters". That means whatever is accepted as 'true' by a group of people is, for them, 'the truth'. There is no objective measurement.

There have been many books and articles written about the postmodern times. And there is still a lot to be written about it. There are some who think that postmodern culture, with its humble attitude to knowing and its emphasis on authenticity and community, is a fertile soil for the message of the Gospel. Others argue that Christianity cannot be successfully communicated and understood if there is no shared concept of truth. One way or another this is the culture we live in, this is the culture we are part of. We cannot do anything else than Christians in each cultural setting. We have to affirm and question, we have to demolish and build. We have to question those assumptions in our culture which contradict the revealed truth in the Word of God. We have to affirm whatever is good, true, honest and beautiful in our world. The fact is, until we meet Christ face to face we only see through the glass darkly. This should lead us to humbleness and awe before our God. This should also lead us to trust and faith in Him. We need Him, we depend on Him.

5.4. Reflections on Christian Press in Slovakia

Each registered Christian denomination under communism had their own periodical. These were not allowed to be sold publicly - they were “for internal use only”. One does not need to emphasise these magazines had to be inside the strict limits imposed by censorship. There was no other Christian press beside 'denominational periodicals'. Their content usually consisted of organisational and administrative information for church members, essays on biblical themes, and personal testimonies. The chief editor had to write articles (usually one per issue) stating nominal support of government policies. They tried to do as much as they could to avoid statements of political support by applying some Christian principles that could be related to a specific issue. For example, when they had to write an article against NATO missiles in Western Europe they resorted to the traditional Christian support of peace. When they wrote an article commemorating an anniversary of the Russian October Revolution they stressed the Christian emphasis on social justice.

What is the situation now? In order to come closer to an answer we studied all of the 1996 issues of key Christian magazines⁸⁸ read by evangelical Christians in Slovakia. Most of them are still published for, and read by, people in both the Czech and Slovak Republics. All except two (*Život víry*, *AD*) are published by a denomination, all except one (*AD*) are published by an evangelical (or 'Protestant') publisher.

We asked two independent researchers to study the whole volume of magazines. One of them was a young evangelical pastor who grew up in the church, the other was our fellow researcher who does not have an 'evangelical family background' and has only recently been getting to know evangelical spirituality and culture. We deliberately decided to give the same task to two people who, although both sympathetic to evangelicalism, have quite different cultural backgrounds. We wanted to find out what the Christian press looks like from the inside as well as outside. Their observations are summarised in the following points:

1. Reading for members. Most of the evangelical periodicals still follow the tradition of a “denominational information bulletin”. The major part of these magazines is dedicated to the problems and issues of the denomination publishing it. It seems as if the editors are trying to foster the subculture of their denomination. “*It would be hard to find out in what time and country their authors live just from reading the articles.*”, as one of our researchers remarked. Due to the number of their members, this stands out especially in the case of smaller denominations, such as the Church of the Brethren (*Cirkev bratská*) or Baptist Union. Their publications often read like journals of a small club with very specific interests, using its own technical language.
2. Unconcerned with the problems in the society. If we believe opinion polls (and our own experience), the biggest problems perceived by our fellow citizens are the high crime rate, the difficult economic situation and the unstable political situation. One hardly finds a mention of these issues in evangelical publications. Writing about politics or the economy is actually discouraged by letters to the editor. The only political issue, mentioned in all of the magazines we studied was State financial support of churches. Some publications (especially *Bratská rodina*) have recently started to publish some articles dealing with ethical issues, such as abortion or euthanasia.
3. History. The publications of the Lutheran Church (*Evanjelický posol*, *Cirkevné listy*) and the Reformed Church (*Kalvínske hlasy*) give significant space to articles on various parts of Christian history. It is usually the history of their own denomination, but *Kalvínske hlasy* also publishes a regular series on church fathers and pre-Reformation personalities.

⁸⁸ *Evanjelický posol*, *Cirkevné listy*, *Rozsieváč*, *Bratská rodina*, *Kalvínske hlasy*, *Život víry*, *AD*

The rest of the evangelical press deals only very rarely with church history. We were not able to find one single article dealing with the impact of communism. The contrast with the Roman Catholic and the general press is - in this respect - staggering.

4. Evangelism and mission. Encouraging reports about evangelistic meetings in the country and abroad are favourite topics of articles in all Christian press. What makes some of these reports sounds a little suspicious is that almost all of them are about successes and victories, none of them about difficulties and failures. One of our researchers missed reactions by the “evangelised ones” - and not only the “evangelisers”. There are very few articles that could help Christians in their attempts to demonstrate the gospel. The emphasis is on 'doing' evangelism.

5. A lack of discussions and polemics. “Our magazine should be a good testimony to the world from the first to the last page, including the cover.”, said a reader in his letter to the editor of *Bratská rodina*.⁸⁹ Maybe because of this aim, everything in Christian magazines tries to look smooth and nice. Real polemics is hard to find. Exceptions are the relatively insignificant issues of church administration, such as the publishing of a new church hymnbook. Some editors seem to be afraid of 'provoking' a conflicting debate, since it might put their denomination “in the wrong light before the world”.

6. Two exceptional examples: *Život víry*, *AD*. Most of what is written in the previous five points does not fit to two special magazines with a distinct flavour: *Život víry* and *AD*. Neither of them is published by a denomination, although *Život víry* is a platform of mission oriented evangelicals with a charismatic leaning and *AD* is a “Catholic monthly for young people”. What makes both of them stand out is the 'normal', civil language they use, the depth of thought in most of their articles, concern for the problems of the wider society, stimulating, real discussions about real issues, and, finally, modern communicative style. *Život víry* is at the same time, the most mission-oriented of the Christian press we studied⁹⁰, while *AD* is unique by its distinguished aesthetic quality and non-conformist attitudes to its own church establishment (the Roman Catholic Church) It is not surprising that these two publications are preferred the most by young evangelicals in the Czech and Slovak Republics.

⁸⁹ *Bratská rodina* 11/96.

⁹⁰ It is interesting that the international mission organization Operation Mobilisation, publishes their Czech and Slovak newsletter as a supplement of *Život víry*.

