

Taboos

In the Central European Church

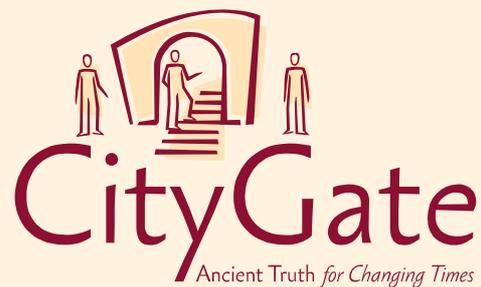
A CityGate Field Studies Paper identifying and describing the issues Christians in Central and Eastern Europe do not talk about.

A CityGate Field Study

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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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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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Introduction

Sometimes our silence speaks

One of CityGate's goals is to understand the Central European church. We aim to understand more deeply its strengths as well as its weaknesses in the hope that these considerations might lead to greater strength and growth.

Every community has its own favourite “no go” subjects – matters other people may often talk about but which, for various reasons, the community concerned considers inappropriate. What is not talked about often better describes a community and its values than that which is a frequent subject of discussions and small talk. Sometimes our silence speaks more loudly than our voices.

We are not the first to recognize that formal and informal discussions in church for some reason avoid certain important areas in life. Many important, even crucial subjects are being carefully avoided.

The fact that Christians in Poland do not often talk about baseball is not – according to our opinion – so important. The fact that they do not discuss money or politics, which are important parts of their daily lives, is noteworthy.

That members of a Northern Bohemian local church do not regularly discuss the philosophy of Immanuel Kant is probably not so strange. It is more significant, that they do not speak openly of their doubts and questions about God.

That pastors from downtown Budapest do not often discuss the problems of farmers is quite understandable. However, if they neglect the frustrations of businesspeople within their churches, they are probably neglecting something important.

In the hope that it will help the church to better understand itself, we asked the question that became the title of this paper: “What do Christians in Central and Eastern Europe not talk about”? Sometimes it is difficult to hear and understand what somebody else is saying. It is much more difficult to understand what has not been said. In spite of this, we tried.

Our approach to taboos?

The research behind this paper comprised two types of activities:

1. Pastors, priests and church activists were asked what, according to their opinion, people in their churches do not talk about. The answers given by these respondents were analyzed and compared to identify the most common “silent areas” in the churches.
2. We participated at various church events, conferences and seminars in Slovakia, Poland, Czech Republic, Hungary and Croatia. Wherever we were, we tried to identify areas and themes which, according to our opinion, should be discussed and talked about, but are not.

The paper in front of you is a synthesis and summary of our findings from both sources. The result is, undeniably, to some extent, subjective. It reflects experiences of those who contributed to our research through their thoughts and observations.

This paper was teamwork in the best sense of the word. Initial research was done primarily by Dusan Jaura, theologian, teacher and CityGate research assistant. The field research was followed by many

most valuable discussions through which we tried to better describe and grasp what had been observed. Dusan Jaura and Juraj Kusnierik then did writing with invaluable editorial help of Hana Vojtova, student of psychology and – in her free time –editing assistant of CityGate.

Over to you

As with all CityGate Papers, we want to start a discussion. Our papers seek to identify burning issues and formulate questions, rather than to present answers. The goal of our work will be accomplished when Christian communities address, rather than avoid, important issues; when the church in Central and Eastern Europe will be known for its openness, depth and humility – rather than fear, superficiality and religious, moralistic pride.

What is Taboo?

Taboo in our region is often understood as a general psychological term with a Freudian or sexual connotation. “Tabu” is both the name of a Slovak tabloid porn magazine and also the name of a late-night Czech TV show devoted to “prohibited” subjects. Both of these media are, obviously, highly popular.

Taboo is a “forbidden area” – that which must not be done, must not be spoken about, must not be asked. Psychologists of Freud’s school describe the complexities of taboos and their social and religious implications. Which areas *are* and which *are not* taboo is rarely supported by logical or rational reasons. Members of a community take that community’s taboos as given and natural. A taboo represents a border one is not supposed to cross. Crossing such a border is considered to be, in milder cases, inappropriate, and, in worse cases, offensive.

To reduce the scope of this paper we have limited our definition of taboo to *that which is not talked about*. Taboo thus will encompass the subjects which are important for the life of an individual or a group but which, for some reasons, are considered inappropriate, threatening or embarrassing. We will understand it as those areas of life, which are avoided in discussions or informal talks or which are approached only from a certain viewpoint, or only in a specific, limited way.

There may, of course be very legitimate reasons why something is not talked about,; for example the sphere of personal privacy is a legitimate taboo. We all have such a sphere and this should be respected by others. Other “silent subjects” indicate that something hidden under the surface of everyday reality is not quite in order or reveal our attempt to close our eyes to our own weaknesses or unresolved issues. The reasons why some subjects are avoided include:

- We want to protect our private space
- Our past experiences make the subject a sensitive one
- The issue concerns political correctness and we don’t want to offend anybody
- We don’t want to admit that we don’t understand the subject
- We fear that a discussion might question our convictions
- We consider the subject vulgar or embarrassing

We will look now at the most common taboos of Central European church.

The Most Common Taboos in the Church

The selection of subjects presented below as “taboos” or “areas of silence”, are based on our observations and interviews conducted during 1998 with activists among various protestant denominations in the region. Some areas are closely connected to each other, others overlap or depend upon each other. By airing these issues we want to inspire Christians to openly and honestly deal with them – before the issues themselves break through the door behind which we locked them out.

Not what we don't say but the way we say it

One of our main observations was that what is taboo is often more a way of speaking about a subject, than a subject itself.

You can hear a lot about sex in Christian TV programs, read about it in church newspapers, hear lectures and public discussions on the subject. It actually seems to be one of the favourite subjects, especially in Roman Catholic circles. But there is always only a certain way of talking about it: e.g. problems in our sexual life, or even the enjoyment of sex in marriage are rarely mentioned.

Similarly money often appears as a subject of church conferences, sermons and informal talks, however one can rarely hear a lecture or read an article on wealth creation or on business finances.

When talking or preaching about politics, Christians quote Romans 13, or talk about “giving to Caesar what belongs to Caesar.”¹ What is the connection between that and paying taxes (how much should we actually pay? What about tax evasion?)? What principles and values should one follow in politics? Is politics really dirtier than, say, engineering? Why? Politics is rarely discussed from this point of view.

And what about the “subject” of most Christian meetings: God? Christians of course talk a lot about God (maybe sometimes even too much). But how often when two Christians have coffee together do they talk about God? God (“religion”) is relegated to church buildings, maybe to our Bible study groups, to prayer meetings and to other “special occasions”. Does God actually have anything to do with our daily lives? Does our vocabulary allow us to say anything meaningful about God outside church?

What is not encouraged is an “unsettling” way of approaching a subject. Christians tend to pretend that they live in a simple, uncomplicated world where every question has a straightforward, clear answer; every problem a definite, immediate solution. When this approach to life does not correspond with the reality we confront in daily living, Christians usually deny it. They become suspicious towards doubts, uneasy with “normal”, non-religious questions. Philosophy – even theology – is seen as dangerous. Thinking is seen as a barrier to one's faith. Art is justified only if it serves the utilitarian purposes of propagating the Gospel or as a tool that inspires “spiritual emotions”.

‘Being like a child’ is taken to mean being simplistic, naïve, easily excited, even *childish*. Maturity, as in the ability to perceive and live life in all its complexity, as in the ability and willingness to make responsible decisions, is rarely encouraged.

¹ Luke 20:25

Money

We started to understand the importance of money after 1989. Obviously it did exist before but its value was limited because only a few products and services were on sale. You often needed to know the “right people” to achieve your goals. Now, one primarily needs money.

Churches in all Central European countries are still significantly financially supported by the state.² Recently they have been receiving support from Western churches. As a result many local churches have (relatively) large buildings, fully equipped offices and several paid workers – all which mean high overhead costs. Church leaders know that this situation will not last very long and so they feel the responsibility for church finances. Their high view of financial discipline, with mandatory tithing, is often the result.

In spite of this pressing need, talking about money and finances is not very common.

Businesspeople in the church. Within a church there are usually several quite wealthy people. They are often the subject of gossip, but – as some of them told us – very rarely directly approached. They sense that covetousness is sometimes hidden behind talks about “social justice”. These Christians lack a place to talk about their difficult struggles in the business world and consequently rarely think about their business life in the context of a Christian worldview.

Lack of transparency. A church in Slovakia decided to send one of its members to start a new church in a nearby town. The church and its new missionary decide that this mission is a full-time ministry and so the church – with help from an international organization – will pay him. The problem is that nobody really knows how much money he gets and he does not understand the concept of accountability. He has no job description and giving reports to the church is viewed as something between unnecessary bureaucracy and insensitive power games. Gossip and rumors spread like mushrooms after summer rain.

Salaries of pastors. The example given in the previous paragraph also applies to the incomes of pastors. Here too problems centre on the lack of clarity and accountability:

- unclear resources (who, apart from the state salary pays them?)
- unclear accountability (to whom are they accountable for their finances?)
- low transparency (money comes from various sources),
- ambiguity about having more money (what happens when a pastor buys new car?)
- an unclear job description (what should a pastor actually “do”?)
- time commitment (how much time should they give to their “job”?)

In order not to offend anybody and in order not to get caught in a power game, church members avoid the subject in direct talks.

Poverty. A Gypsy woman³ with a small child enters the church building on a Sunday morning. She sits through the service and afterwards wants to speak with the pastor. She tells him she and her child are very poor, actually quite hungry. Will he give them some

² This is a residue of the communist regime. Communist authorities controlled churches by making them financially dependent on the state subsidies. Pastors and priests of registered denominations were getting their salaries from the state. Church members were thus not responsible for the well-being of their ministers. The financial side of this arrangement is still the same ten years after the fall of communism. State authorities do not control or manipulate churches, but they still pay money to church ministers.

³ Gypsies (or Roma, as they should be called) are the most socially disadvantaged ethnic group in Central and Eastern Europe. According to social observers they have all signs of typical “underclass”. That is why the story mentioned above is very typical.

money? This situation is not so rare in the post-communist Central Europe and in Balkan and former Soviet countries it is almost an everyday experience. What should Christians do? How should they deal with these discomfoting people? What principles should they follow in their dealing with poverty? And, what is poverty after all?

These are difficult questions. Answers will not be found by avoiding them. They should be discussed, studied, preached and prayed about. This is – unfortunately – rarely the case.

Sex

“When are you going to ‘make love’?” our seven-year-old daughter asked me and my wife one evening. Talking about sex and love has been part of her world at least since she started to go to school. We, her parents, cannot avoid talking about it and thoughtfully explaining it. To pretend we are unaware of her questions, or that we don’t hear them, would be counter-productive.

However, Christians often do exactly that: they try to behave as if they do not live in their world or their culture. Of course we have lectures, write articles and preach sermons about the importance of the family, the dangers of pre-marital sex, the problems facing single-parent families and so on. All this may well be very good, but where or to whom does a teenager go if he or she comes to terms with his or her own sexuality, is there somebody somewhere he or she can come and talk to? Is there a safe place for a mature man dealing with temptation at his workplace to talk and pray? To whom would a man discovering his homosexual attractions go, where he knows he would be really heard and not just rebuked or disciplined?

These subjects need privacy. They are not supposed to be discussed publicly. The problem is that the atmosphere in churches in Central and Eastern Europe does not give the safe space needful for personal growth. Potentially threatening issues are avoided.

Authority

Interestingly authority is a very ambiguous issue in Protestant circles. Protestant denominations share a generally low view of institutional authority. No church institution or office mediates between God and men; and yet it is very common that a local church pastor or a chairman (bishop, secretary, etc.) of a denomination exerts considerable authority. Although this kind of authority is not officially sanctioned, it is nevertheless very strong.

When a pastor walks into the church assembly on Sunday morning, people stand up to show respect in some evangelical churches. Pastoral authority is especially strong in small towns and villages.

The rigid authority structures of many evangelical churches in Central Europe (and not only there) is often gossiped about. It is often cited as the reason why more independently minded young people as well as mature middle aged church members find it hard to identify with the church. It does not support, but rather suppresses personal growth. The Church is seen as a good place for children and elderly people – but not for strong, active and creative men and women.

There are complex forces involved in church power games. How does God’s lordship determine church structure? Do strong, dominant personalities influence and/or manipulate a small community? To what extent do Christian fellowships take and copy the patterns of authority prevailing in our culture rather than seek biblical principles, values and examples?

These very important questions are but rarely discussed, preached and taught in Central European churches. Why is that? One reason might be the fear of touching sensitive spots, which might lead to tensions in relationships. The status quo might be brought into question. Those people who have built their personal identity and values on it will feel threatened.

Politics

Attitudes to public life⁴ have dramatically changed in churches and societies of post-communist Central Europe: from proclaimed apolitical stances (usually justified by theological reasons, but often caused by fear and uncertainty), through hyper-activism during and shortly after the revolutionary changes, to a cynical and skeptical attitude towards the “dirty world of politics”.

The situation seems to be “settled” in most of Central European countries for now. No dramatic, revolutionary change is looming. Some people are interested in politics, follow parliamentary debates, government sessions, and international diplomacy. Most of the population is more interested in the practical issues of everyday life, such as their family financial situation, the success of their businesses, their taxes (i.e. how to avoid paying too much), the performance of public transportation, crime rate, unemployment, healthcare, or education.

This might be an ideal time for deeper theological reflection on many important issues of public life in the church, theological seminaries and bible schools. There are many questions to be raised, including:

- What is the proper authority of the state?
- Can Christians serve in the armed forces?
- How should we think theologically about economics (in other words: is it sinful to be wealthy and spiritual to be poor?)?
- What about nationalism and xenophobia?
- What should be the proper relationship between church and state?

These questions, important as they are, are rarely brought up in Central European Christian communities. It is still considered too sensitive to talk about involvement in politics or about church attitudes under the communist regime. There is still almost no discussion about economics from a Christian perspective.

As a result of this, the church is ready to accept any ideas prevailing in contemporary culture. Christians tend to use religious language, Bible verses and a superficial understanding of theology and politics to justify their attitudes and to attack those who disagree with them. There is a great amount of emotional baggage involved in any discussion of politics and economics. To avoid conflicts, pastors and teachers tend to either avoid these issues or they end up repeating religious clichés that “cannot offend” anybody. The majority of the population sees Christianity as irrelevant. It does not seem to have much to say about the burning reality as we know it. Christians feel unsafe and uneasy outside their religious clichés.

“That What Divides”

Peace, unity and proper dealing with conflicts are very important characteristics of a healthy church. That is why divisions are not to be taken lightly in any situation. It is good and commendable to pursue peace and mutual understanding.

Small evangelical communities have a strong desire for growth and a broader acceptance and influence in society. In order to be heard they try to overlook and suppress potential disagreements in theology, church practice and opinions. Tolerance and a space for differing opinions give way to the

⁴ We prefer to use ‘public life’ instead of ‘politics’, because the latter has usually a more narrow meaning in our cultures. ‘Politics’ usually refers to professional politics, such as government, parliament, etc.. By ‘public life’ we mean anything belonging to the ‘public sphere’ of our lives, whether on a local or national level.

pretension that disagreements do not exist. This is taking place not only on an inter-denominational level, but also in individual denominations or a local church.

It seems as if there are only two extreme options: either total (feigned) agreement in everything or a hostile relationship with no co-operation or communication.

The most important and most substantial issues are often carefully avoided. We do not preach about “salvation through grace only” so as not to offend those with Roman Catholic background. We do not teach about nationalism, because a respected church member is a known supporter of a nationalistic political party. We do not discuss the importance of engaging in public life so that our pietistic brothers will not be offended. We avoid speaking about “charismatic issues” in order to not offend charismatic friends.

Whatever might bring disagreement and division is avoided. The illusion of unity remains only an illusion. One characteristic of maturity is the ability to live with disagreements – i.e. the ability to live with those with whom one disagrees without seeing them as enemies. If this is true, then the church in post-communist countries has not yet reached its adult age. We still find it difficult to live in our imperfect world.

Theology and Philosophy

Activism is a traditionally strong feature of evangelical Christians and so is a lower view of scholarship⁵ among church members. Taking theological or philosophical questions seriously is considered suspicious. The Gospel is simple, isn't it?

The most common result of this attitude is, unfortunately, confusion and superficiality, rather than a soundness and simplicity about the profound good news about God and man.

Theology and philosophy are avoided often because of our lack of knowledge, wisdom and because of the fear of being proven wrong. We prefer to stick to our good old clichés, to the safe sanctuaries of our church buildings with its plausible questions and familiar issues, with obvious and simple answers to questions that are rarely asked. We are afraid of thinking deeply because we are not sure whether our Christianity will be found to be wrong, defeated or simply irrelevant.

We find it very difficult to say “I don't know”. We proclaim that Jesus is the answer to all questions, but we hope that really hard questions will not be asked.

Privacy: Boundaries to Be Respected

Are there any areas of personal life that should be respected – even by fellow Christians? We want to suggest that they are there and that they are very important. They are not only important, they are often overlooked, neglected and not respected.

Those who grew up in the church can give many illustrations of invasions into their private life. They were told (by other church members, not their parents) what haircut to have or what clothes to wear, what school (or not) to study in, what books (or not) to read, whom (or not) to befriend, whom (or not) to marry, where to live, how many children to have and how to raise them up, what to do in their free time, where to work, what to think, how to vote, what music to like, how much to spend for their holidays, how much to give to the church. Insensitive manipulation was understood as “concern for others”. Respect for the individual and his or her space was forgotten.

⁵ This refers to a general perception and does not suggest that there have been no good evangelical scholars. The opposite is true. Protestant and evangelical contribution to theology, philosophy, linguistics, archaeology, social sciences, or history is outstanding. It is accepted as such in any serious academic circles.

The privacy of every human being should be respected and highly valued. The privilege of sharing something deep and personal with those we trust should be recognized and respected. This does not mean alienation or a lack of care for each other. It only means entry to the private sphere is by invitation only.

Gossip is one of the most deadly sins in a church. It tends to be taken more lightly than it deserves. Spreading rumours about somebody's private life is gross disrespect for their person. Although it often takes place in all types of groups and communities, it must not be considered "normal" in a Christian fellowship. It is a consequence of having areas of silence in the church. What cannot be discussed openly becomes a subject of gossip.

Honesty

Taboos in the church should carry a health warning. They can cause serious damage. They lead to shallowness in the Christian life and a superficiality of thinking. They might weaken relationships in the church and severely limit relationships with non-Christians. Taboos, which are not identified and dealt with work against church growth and its positive impact on society.

In the next section we will look at possible ways to deal with the taboos, which are silently damaging churches in Central Europe. At the root of avoiding and suppressing sensitive issues and disquieting questions is lack of honesty. Christians, proclaiming their obedience to Truth, revealed in God's Word and in God incarnate, should be known as those who indeed live in truth. They should live in radical honesty – not only in their religious affections, but also in their public and private life: in politics as well as church administration, in family relationships as well as in economic decisions.

Each of us is to some degree a hypocrite. We want to be seen as better than we really are. We have a strong desire to be recognized as good, righteous, nice and loving. What we probably need most is honesty. We need the courage to look at ourselves and see who we really are. God already knows that better than we do.

Keeping this in mind we will look at the possible ways of dealing with taboos in the church.

Is Change Possible?

In this section we address possible ways of dealing with unresolved or suppressed areas of the Christian life – those taboos we have identified. We do not have solutions, only suggestions towards possible ways out of this situation.

These suggestions fall into three general aspects of life in Christian communities.

Theology

What is Christianity about?

Christianity does not deal only with religious side of life. It is not only “talking about God”. The Old and New Testaments describe life in its fullness. Christianity describes life in reality as we know it in our everyday experiences. The Gospel brings light into all areas of life. A person does not have to escape reality in order to be a Christian. God as Jesus Christ entered our reality. The world in which we live is not strange and distant for him. It should not be strange and distant for us either.

To live a “spiritual” life does not mean fleeing from or evasion of “worldly” issues. The division of life into its secular and spiritual parts is more a Platonic⁶ idea than a Christian one. Throughout Christian history the church has tended to emphasize the fact that Christianity touches, in a profound way, all areas of life⁷.

The mere existence of taboos as they were described above, is a reduction of Christianity and as such requires our attention. A way out of this might start with a careful reading of the Bible and in finding connections between what it says and the multi-dimensional reality of our life. Politics, financial matters, sex or philosophy are recurring subjects in the books of Old and New Testaments.

What Does It Mean To Be Human?

Observation of church life today might easily bring one to the conclusion that to be Christian means to stop being a normal human being. One could be led to believe that spiritual life suppresses normal, common, human aspects of life. It looks as if a Christian life means leaving the world in which we live:

- An interesting job becomes only a means to survive or an opportunity to do evangelism
- Art (music, films, literature) is seen as valuable only to the extent in which the art product can be used in evangelism or worship
- Sports can be justified only by an evangelistic goal
- Relationships become tools for evangelism, discipleship or counseling
- Politics or business is perceived as matters of “this world”
- Friends become “brothers and sisters”

⁶ Refers to the great Greek philosopher Plato (427-347 BC). A reference to “Platonic” ideas usually (as in our text) refers to Plato’s division of reality to its spiritual and material parts. Spiritual reality (world of ideas) is higher, better and more real, than its material reflection. The material world as we see it is only a shadow of ideas and thus less real and of a lower quality and importance. Platonism significantly influenced Christian theology, which sometimes too readily accepts the dualistic division of reality into “spiritual and “worldly” realms.

⁷ There were movements emphasizing “spiritual” or “social” aspect of Christianity. They always reacted to an unbalanced theology and practice of contemporary church. Pietism, reacting to cold theology of Lutheran church in Germany in the eighteenth century is among the most notable examples of this reaction.

The reality of life in a materialistic and consumerist society leads Christians to emphasise the spiritual, supernatural dimension of reality. This correct emphasis should not lead to the suppression of other aspects of the Christian message. Man does not live on bread alone, but daily bread is still an important part of our life. To be a Christian does not mean we stop being a “normal” person. Jesus’ descriptions of God’s judgement⁸ indicate that God sees and recognizes “common” human compassion, practical solidarity and care for foreigners and prisoners as expressions of righteousness. In a similar way, expressions of the working of the Holy Spirit in one’s life are, according to the apostle Paul,⁹ generally accepted (but rarely practised) “human” virtues. Christians should be strong in patience, generosity and self-control. Christians should be human.

Unity in Diversity

The Triune God is the perfect unity in diversity. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit are perfectly united, while at the same time different. God is love, but that does not mean that inside the Trinity the Father stops being Father, the Son stops being the Son and the Holy Spirit stops being Holy Spirit.

In a similar – but far from perfect – way people develop relationships of unity in diversity. Husband and wife become “one body”, while not ceasing to be a man and a woman or father and mother. The Church should, according to its biblical descriptions, be characterized by unity – the unity of a body with its different parts, not the monochrome uniformity of an army.

For unity in diversity to exist there must be freedom to express the individuality of each participant. A variety of opinions, preferences and tastes is a basic assumption. It can be known through a network of deep, authentic, personal relationships, respecting the freedom of individuals. An attempt to create an impression of unity by suppressing variety does so against the basic nature of fellowship. It leads to nothing but gossips, legalism, hypocrisy, hostility and hatred.

The re-discovery of unity in diversity in Christian fellowships and churches might be the most effective evangelistic action, which a church in contemporary society can undertake.

Faith, Trust and Certainty – The Importance of Questions and Doubts

The problem of knowing – i.e. how do I know that I know – is, according to our observations, one of the key issues in contemporary postmodern culture. Postmodern philosophy and our current cultural context remind us of the complexity of the process of knowing and believing. Our cultural milieu puts a big question mark behind every notion of certainty. To say that I know something with complete, perfect certainty is more difficult today than in any previous time.

Sometimes the tension between a desire for absolute certainty and the reality, in which we are quite far from certainty, seems unbearable. We would like to see with our own eyes, touch with our own hands, but we are left with faith and hope. Relationship with God, knowing God, experiencing His presence – all this is based on the reasonable ground for trust and confidence, the revealed Word of God. We read, observe and interpret the Word together with the Christian community, which crosses through geographical and time barriers.

Our relationship with God is thus characterized by many questions and doubts. If what is written in the Bible and formulated in Christian confessions is true, then we have nothing to be afraid of. Jesus really is the answer to our doubts and questions. Suppressing doubts, instead of seriously dealing with them – as we observed it in our research – is the expression of a low, limited view of God. This God has answers only to religious or “spiritual” questions. Deeply thinking or existential doubts

⁸ Mathew 25:31-46

⁹ Galatians 5:22-26; Colossians 3:12-13

might find him “unprepared”. Or – and this is much more probable – we would ourselves be unprepared and surprised by such inquiries. This would then lead us to accept the fact that we do not know the answers to all questions.

The Apostle Paul, in his famous text about love¹⁰, wrote that “now [we] know only in part”, that we “see in a mirror, dimly”. One day we will know and see fully. Until then, we will have to live in faith. Disturbing questions and doubts are, or should be, our helpers not our enemies.

Sociology

We consider it important to mention two, often neglected points which describe the sociological reality of Christian communities as they struggle with unhealthy taboos. The Church, especially in its local expression, is both a human community and a sociologically defined group. Their social and relational dynamism is not dissimilar from other similar groups.

Small communities

Most Protestant churches in Central Europe consist of small groups.¹¹ Many Christian communities still recall, in living memory, the negative attitudes of secular society held towards them. This strengthens the feeling of being a small, insignificant group of “good guys” in a hostile environment. This minority attitude reinforces the tendency toward uniformity, strong group loyalty, isolation from the outside world and the black-and-white concept of the world common in most evangelical communities.

Churches are aware of the fact that they cannot be completely closed to society. One core value is witness to the non-Christian world. They have to communicate to get new converts, church members and supporters. A certain level of openness is necessary. If the level of openness is low, the outside world is perceived as “enemy territory”. This is expressed by the attitude “he who is not with us is against us”.

Complete isolation from the world is not only wrong, it is also impossible. The “world” penetrates small Christian communities in various ways. Christians have no other place to live than the world as it is expressed in their particular cultural context. Some areas of culture (such as politics, philosophy or rock music) are seen as a threat to Christian group identity. Involvement in them is discouraged and suppressed.

The way out of this theologically weak and culturally irrelevant Christianity is to learn, think and talk about the greatness of the church, which is the body of Christ. It is greater than a small group meeting behind closed doors in small, dimly lit rooms. Studying church history, communication with other Christians, getting information about what is going on in the Christian world – all this might help in the struggle with our sense of smallness.

Another important subject, which might help in overcoming the barriers between church community and the outside world is the question of identity. The Church in all of its expressions and forms should build its identity on Jesus Christ and not on the weak legs of denominational, institutional and cultural peculiarity. The community, which gathers around the corporate knowing and adoration of God, corporate seeking and discovering His thoughts about this world, does not need to be afraid of openness. It does not need to be afraid of the world in which it should be salt and light.

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 13

¹¹ More about sociological aspects of evangelical Christians in Central Europe in Juraj Kusnierik, *Evangelicals in Central Europe*, CityGate, Bratislava, 1997.

From Unifying Identity to Social and Political Heterogeneity

Church communities were quite homogeneous until a few years ago. They consisted of slightly socially disadvantaged or marginalised people. The possibilities for work in some areas of life (art, management or education) were limited. Other areas (politics or journalism) were completely closed to them. As a result of this, the economic and social diversity of Christians was very small. Political diversity was an unknown term¹².

The picture is quite different ten years after the fall of the Iron Curtain. Churches are attended by successful businessmen as well as by the unemployed, by sportsmen as well as artists, by people with various levels of education, varying taste, varying political orientations. The tendency towards uniformity, which is – in spite of broad diversity – still present, must not survive. If church leaders continue to try to suppress colourful reality by uniformity and legalism, their churches will become irrelevant and unattractive places. Greyness and mediocrity will become the standard and norm.

Pastoral Care

Respect

One of the most misused of biblical metaphors is the picture of the shepherd and sheep. The sheep is a very apt picture in which many of us are able to recognize ourselves: a helpless, weak and not too intelligent animal, often greedy and stubborn, which is lost without a shepherd, which has a strong tendency to go astray, which needs somebody to lead it to sources of food.

However, the shepherd in the Bible illustrates God, or those to whom He delegated certain (always limited) responsibility for a community. The role of a shepherd is to protect his sheep and help them (as the Shepherd Jesus did in a perfect and complete way when he “laid his life for the sheep”) Ignorant or evil shepherds, described for example in Ezekiel’s prophecy (chapter 34), tend to misuse their position and influence. They try to manipulate, control, limit, abuse, or extort the sheep, while behaving as if they are the owners of the flock.

In Slavic languages, the words “pastor” and “shepherd” (“pastier” in Slovak, for example) are very close. Pastors, preachers, ministers – as everybody else – are tempted to put themselves at the centre and use others to strengthen their position. A deformed picture of the shepherd and sheep can be easily (mis-)used for this aim. The declared goal of “protecting the sheep” may lead to the manipulation and suppression of the personal development of church members. The fear of “sheep stealing” by other denominations could be a fear of losing one’s own area of influence. This picture of the shepherd (pastor) and sheep (church members) might lead to the feeling that church members are just sheep, while the pastor-shepherd is something more.

The previous paragraph does not seek to encourage irresponsibility or lack of interest and care for others. It is only a warning – unfortunately based on real observations and experiences – about the misinterpretation and misuse of one biblical picture to create and strengthen one’s own position of power. Pastors – and all who are in the position of influence and authority – should not forget that those they are trying to help are the same kind of people as themselves. All of us are endowed with freedom and burdened by responsibility. Each person deserves respect. There is just one shepherd. The rest of us are sheep.

¹² There were important differences in the degree of adaptation to and co-operation with communist regime. Principled critical attitude to communist regime with all the complications connected with it (no possibility of university studies, low-salary job, occasional interrogations, limited possibilities of travelling, etc.) was very rare in Christian circles.

Perfectionism

Perfectionism is the desire for the perfection of “here and now”. It is often understood as a positive character feature. Perfectionism recognizes only two colours: black and white. Something is either perfect or it does not have any value whatsoever. A perfectionist is not satisfied with his or her work until it is perfect – and he expects perfection from others as well.

In the context of this paper, perfectionism is about the tension between the ideal and reality. When we think about how to get from where we are to where we want to be, we are tempted to take one of the two extreme positions: either we give ourselves up to skepticism (“nothing can be done”) or we subscribe to optimistic perfectionism (the ideal has to take place immediately and in its fullness). The perfectionist option is much more common in Christian circles. Christians often believe the illusion that change takes place immediately. If somebody becomes a Christian, all his problems are immediately (or in a very short time) solved, his questions will be once for all answered, his relationships (especially with Christians) will be made perfect. It is never so simple and fast in real life. The change, growth takes a lifetime. Unanswered questions, unsolved problems or not completely healthy relationships will be always be part of our lives – this side of heaven.

Christian communities need space for change, development and growth. We are people on a journey. We live in painful tension between the reality we see around and inside ourselves and the ideal we read about in the Bible. If we try – by suppressing everything problematic and imperfect – to create the illusion that reality is not so, we forfeit authenticity and honesty. Light becomes dusk, salt loses saltiness.

Truth, Grace and Time

Earlier we questioned whether change is possible. With humility we want to say that yes, we think it is. Change needs truth, grace and time¹³.

Truth is the opposite of illusion and lie. It is often not pleasant. The theme of this paper is “that which is not talked about”. The main reason for silence is the fear that a certain subject or a certain way of looking at things might threaten our convictions, beliefs, and our identity. Change assumes the willingness and courage to open up subjects, which are for many reason not pleasant. It is like looking in the mirror and saying “This is me. This is us.” At the centre of the Christian message is the thought that truth does not have its source in human discourse. The source of truth and truth’s perfection – its beginning and end – is in God. Only on the basis of God’s revelation are we able to know something of the truth – however imperfectly. Knowing the truth about God as He is revealed in His word might be discomfoting. Coming to God, we also get to know ourselves. We find out who we are – and who we should be. We learn that we are sinful people.

Grace is what makes Christianity different from a system of ethics. In spite of our sinfulness God does not judge us. His attitude to human beings is in the expression of grace. Grace is not the opposite of truth. It is the attitude that helps us to live in truth. Nobody comes to God by walking the steps of fulfilling ethical principles. Everybody needs grace. Grace is what we do not deserve but still get. It should penetrate our relationships. We, as well as our communities, need a place of grace. A place in which one does not need to be perfect (and does not have to feign perfection) to be accepted by others. Good behaviour is not and should not be the condition of acceptance by a Christian community.

Changes take place in **time**. The growth of an individual as well as the change of atmosphere in a community always takes time. However we desire for perfection and change for the better, the change itself is a long process. The subjects, which were taboo will not become a favourite subject of

¹³ For thoughts about truth, grace and time we are thankful to Dr. Henry Cloud, author of several books on this subject, with whom we had a seminar on “Changes That Heal” in Czech Republic in August 1999.

conversation overnight. A weakness will not turn into strength in a single moment. Somebody said that chopping down a tree usually takes about hundred years less than it took to grow. It is similar with men and women and communities in which they live. Destruction is always faster than growth. Illness is usually more intense than long, substantial healing. Change in the Church is not revolutionary, but it is taking place anyway. Closed communities are becoming more open. People who are not afraid of questions and doubts are multiplying in the Church. The Church is contributing towards the solutions for the burning problems in society. And that is a reason for optimism.

Safe Space

When we talk to Christians in various Central and Eastern European countries we often hear the same complaint about the church. It is too rigid, too authoritarian. There is not enough space to be oneself in it. We firmly believe it should not be like that. During the time of putting this paper together we spent considerable amount of time thinking about and discussing how a safe space in the church should look like. We added some of our thoughts as appendix to this paper. They might raise questions and stimulate discussion. That might contribute towards development of the church, in which “that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.”¹⁴

Safe space should allow people who come into church to be themselves and feel secure enough to ask their most significant questions in an atmosphere of trust and respect. Christians do not have to pretend they know all the answers, but should be committed to respecting those people who come to them.

Safe space reflects values and theology. Theology is primarily neither an academic enterprise, nor a religious discourse torn from real life. Theology is description of how things really are. Theology is description of reality.

Safe space is a medium for the development of trust. It is not only about intellectual pursuits and knowledge. It includes these but we believe that human beings are more than “mere” minds with bodies. Safe space is a place for personal growth towards maturity.

The values, safe space reflects, include:

- Non-judgemental
- Listening before speaking
- Faith and realism
- No clichés
- No excluded questions
- Respect for every individual
- Freedom and a framework for asking real questions
- Creativity and form
- Beauty, order, balance
- Orthodoxy and openness
- Theology that is deep and relevant

Safe space should be a mark of church. Church in its various forms should be known as the safe place, open to everybody. It is not only tolerance, it is also deep, authentic, serious interest in other people with ultimate goal being their growth towards maturity.

¹⁴ Hebrews 12:13