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**THE NATURE AND MISSION OF THE CHURCH**

(The View of the Evangelical Church)

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## **ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS:**

1. Does this document provide a true reflection of our common beliefs in the area of ecclesiology and the ones which continue to separate us?

**Answer:** The document is maximally close to Biblical ecclesiology; it objectively reflects the Christology and pneumatology of the Church. However, its weak place is considered to be a lack of analyses of the main factors which have caused the division of the Church, namely: mistakes of patristic authors and removing the dominating role of the Word of God and the Holy Spirit in the functioning of the Church. These causes are still present in the churches, and thus divisions are still present.

2. Does this document reflect existing points of contact regarding the nature and mission of the Church?

**Answer:** Undoubtedly. If the biblical aspects of the nature and mission of the Church provided in the document were heard and realized, the matter of the unity of the Church would be resolved to a great extent and with God's blessing.

3. Are there important topics in the document which do not provide adequate consideration of issues which are of greatest concern for your Church?

**Answer:** If I understand the question correctly, the answer given in paragraph 1 could be concretized: Our Church is more concerned with turning to ecumenism of the Church based on common principles of the teaching of Christ as well as the model of the apostolic Church. The higher authority of the Gospel of Christ in modern ecumenism has not, unfortunately, reached its dominating height.

4. How can the existing document help your Church together with others to take specific steps towards unity?

**Answer:** Since the Word of God is predominant in this document, it has the right to be an inspiration and driving force for practical dialogue on the issue of the unity of the Church and its return to authority and influence in the world according to the model of the apostolic Church.

5. What are your suggestions for further development of this text?

**Answer:** Our suggestions:

- a) To ask participants in further theological disputes to provide New Testament grounds for the beliefs and dogmas of their Church.
- b) To repent in front of God and each other for the sins of separation, separatism, and the deepening of separation in the Church.
- c) To agree to start a new page in Christian history in solidarity, peace, and mutual respect: in common evangelization, programs of charity, in joint religious services, in joint programs teaching Christian ethics, and in defense of human values, to root out immorality and the spiritual decline of human society.

And to provide grounds for the position of our Church regarding this document, it is necessary to provide our comments on separate issues of the document.

## **THE INSTITUTIONAL DIMENSION OF THE CHURCH**

The Church of Christ as “creatura Verbi” and “creatura Spiritus” is a real reflection of the teaching and Person of Christ on earth, and is called His Body (Eph 1:23), is a live spiritual organism (body), the “house of God,” created on the basis of the apostles and prophets, and the cornerstone of which is Jesus Christ Himself (Eph 2:19-22; 1 Pet 2:6).

Thus, the institute of clergy in the Church of Christ is an operating instrument to affirm the faithful of the Church in the grace of the Word and Holy Spirit, but not a guarantee of the presence of this grace in the Church, and moreover: the New Testament does not give any grounds for a hereditary clergy (Acts 6:3; Gal 1:1,5).

### **THE CHURCH OF CHRIST: THE BODY OF CHRIST, THE HOUSE OF GOD, KOINONIA**

The position of the Evangelical Church completely coincides with the argumentation given in the document.

The Church, “the Body of Christ,” is of one essence with Christ in spirit, morals, and activity, indivisible from Christ, and therefore separated from the world (John 17:14-17).

The Church, “the House of God” (Heb 3:6), reflects the Old Testament ark of the covenant that was the source of life for all the people of Israel.

The Church is “Koinonia” (communication, communion), a model of morality, purity, and social equity (balance) (Matt 5:13-16; John 12:31).

Taking into account the mentioned characteristics of the Church, it should not be considered as a “mysterion” with transcendental nature, or as “God’s Mystery” on earth. It *is* the revealed mystery of God for the good and salvation of humanity.

If the Church of Christ is perceived as a transcendental “mystery of God,” then its main attributes, repentance, baptism, Eucharist, will always be hidden from Christians and wrapped in mystery, which cannot positively influence their life and the spiritual healing of society.

### **THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH**

The Evangelical Church is in solidarity with the statement of the document on the mission of the Church on earth, namely:

§ 35. The Church is called to reveal the grace of God towards humanity and lead it to the set goal, to praise God together with all the heavenly forces, and to achieve the goal of God’s design, which is a gift for the whole world, to ensure that all people start believing and are saved. (John 17:21).

Christians are called to preach the Gospel of Christ by word and by deed. They are to bring the Good News of the Kingdom of God, addressing those who have not heard it yet, as well as those who have left it.

§ 36. The Church, which embodies the salvation and transfiguration of humanity, takes part in the mission of Christ in various ways, namely: Liturgy, help and mercy (diakonia), and preaching (kerygma).

§ 38. The mission of the Church is to fully reflect the Mission of Christ on earth, comprising preaching the Word of God and faithful caring for those in need and those who suffer, similar to the apostolic Church.

§ 39. Since the ministry of Christ was inseparably associated with suffering, then the preaching (martyria) of the Church will also call it to the way of the Cross (Matt 10:16-33 and 16:24-28; 1 John 5:4-8).

§ 40. The Church of Christ in the strength of the Holy Spirit is called to faithfully preach the fullness of the teaching of Christ, in apostolic faith, in life and witnessing. Thus, the Church witnesses God's love to everybody, and itself lives by this love and accomplishes Christ's Mission of the salvation and renewal of the world, for the glory of God.

## **THE CHURCH IN HISTORY. THE CHURCH AND SIN**

The Church of Christ is an eschatological community of saved people whom God wants and who in their spirit are already in the divine presence of God (Eph 2:4-6). And since the Heavenly Kingdom is meant for saints and pure people (Rev 21:26-27), then in its earthly dimension the Church of Christ cannot be characterized as a community where sin and departure from the truth might occur.

Yes, in its earthly form the Church is "a large house where there are articles for humble purposes," but these articles do not define the status and vocation of the Church, built on a basis that cannot be destroyed: **"The Lord knows those who are his,"** and, **"Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness."** (2 Tim 2:19-21)

Strange and not understandable is the statement of the mentioned document which states the following: "The unfortunate divisions among the churches are due partly to sin, and partly to a sincere attempt of Christians to be faithful to the truth. "(§ 53, page 11)

Then are we to understand that sin and an uncompromising attitude towards sin are synonymous?

Should sinless Christians compromise the Word of God and their own consciences for the sake of unity?

After a wonderful affirmation: "where the whole mystery of Christ is present, there too is the Church catholic," we hear the sad reality of a distorted understanding of the text of 1 John 1:8 (which is typical of many Christians) about the inseparable part of sin in the Church and that the faithful born from the Holy Spirit, who constitute the Body of Christ, in this world remain sinful people.

Then, how does a catholic Church look with sinners in its body? Holiness and sin lie in opposite directions, and thus they can never be compatible. And therefore, God's oikumene can be achieved only on the basis of the complete separation of all ecumenical Christians from any kind of sin.

Holiness and the dominating power of the Word of God and the Holy Spirit in the Church will never cause among Christians any precedent of confrontation and alienation. On the contrary, sin and going astray from the truth of God have always been the source of religious intolerance and divisions.

## UNITY IN DIVERSITY

A presentation on the gifts of the Holy Spirit starts with an affirmation of the unity of the Church in the diversity of ministries in it: **“There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men.”** (1 Cor 12:4-6)

Yes, it is very simple for God, but often unachievable for people. Why? The answer here is very simple: The action of the Holy Spirit and His grace in the Church can be understood only by those people who naturally have the Holy Spirit in their hearts.

Only the anointing of the Holy Spirit gives the faithful of Christ the spirit of true tolerance and religious tolerance. We know how sad at heart our Savior was when He observed arrogance and religious intolerance in the behavior and words of the apostles, when for a single offence they were ready to burn a whole village and to forbid a person from exorcizing demons (Matt 9:38-40).

And the main reason for divisions and intolerance lies in the lack of spirituality of Christians, and most of all when church leaders are not spiritual.

A lack of spirituality flows from sinfulness and human pride. Thus, the conclusion is as follows: an ecumenism which by means of declarations and good intentions has covered over a sinful lack of spirituality leads to the spiritual decline of the saintly who have joined the sinful.

“Various ministries” does not mean that sin and holiness have the same spirit. The Apostle Paul speaks of various ministries of the Holy Spirit in the Church, but not about the combination of sin with saintliness. Because the highest authority of the Church consists in its conscious, reverent following of the Lord and separation from the sin and lawlessness which dominate in this world and make claims to a rightful place in the Church of Christ.

The Apostle Paul characterizes the Church as “a big house” where, along with luxurious dishware for honorable usage, there is dishware for regular usage (2 Tim 2:20-21).

Also, Christ compares the Heavenly Kingdom in earthly form with the field where wheat and weeds grow side by side, and with a net which catches fish of various sizes and kinds. But this does not mean that “the House of God,” Christ’s Church, no longer exists in such a house.

But it would be a big mistake to believe that due to negative characteristics of the forming of the Church we should start establishing “a big house,” liberalizing sin in the Church and not encouraging **“let him who is holy continue to be holy.”** (Rev 22:11)

Taking into account the above mentioned, we can understand that there are only two main factors, or better to say, two barriers on the road to the ecumenical unity of Christians, namely: the status of sin in the Church and the place of the Word of God in the beliefs of the Christian Churches. The inability to overcome these barriers or reluctance to change their dogmas and beliefs have caused three dominating ecclesiological doctrines in various Churches:

1. Only our Church is true and authentic, all the rest remain in an ecclesiological vacuum.
2. The Traditional Church professes ecclesiology on the grounds of the so-called “branch theory,” that is, an ecclesiological tree with the trunk and roots of its own Church, and the branches are all the other churches, independent both from one another and from the main trunk, but in summation they make the “Universal Church.”
3. The dominating mother Church is not singled out in this ecclesiology, but the existence of a Single Church in the world is emphasized. According to such a perspective, the Church of Christ exists everywhere where the full Gospel is correctly preached, and where the Mysteries [Sacraments] are accurately performed. This ecclesiological view emphasizes the extent to which churches preserve the relevance between the Gospel and the official activity and teaching of the given church. It is emphasized that, even when in separate churches the Gospel is hidden behind official teaching and activity, this cannot deprive them of the presence of Christ inside them, as well as their belonging to the Single Church.

Thus, the existence of these three ecclesiological doctrines brings about the following question: Is it possible for the Churches to live, having mutual responsibilities, supporting each other, and not allowing new problems to cause separation inside the Churches and between them? And how can they do this at the present stage of the ecumenical movement?

Taking into account the basic teaching of Christ on the Single Church and His High Priestly prayer, we can provide a confident answer to the given question: Undoubtedly, the Churches can do this, and great efforts should be involved in dialogue between churches as well as cooperation. But only under one condition: the Gospel, the teaching of Christ and the Apostles, should be the main criterion and guideline on the way to unity, mutual understanding, and cooperation.

Since the Single Church of Christ has been established on the firm basis “creatura Verbi” (faithful to the Word) and “creatura Spiritus” (faithful to the Holy Spirit), then these fundamental aspects should dominate in the whole ecumenical movement, and in ecclesiology as well.

In apostolic times, the global issue of Christian-Jewish and Christian-pagan relations were resolved on such fruitful soil at the First Council of Jerusalem in 49 A.D.

The secret of the brilliant success of that Council consisted in that fact that the apostolic Church at that time had not lost faithfulness to the Word of God and the power and acts of the Holy Spirit. The Grace of God then was truly perceived as a higher authority, as the one that **“teaches and brings salvation.”** (Titus 2:11-12)

§ 65 of the document states that the communion of local Churches embraces all local Churches of all countries and times. And this communion is ensured by one Gospel, one baptism, and one Supper of the Lord. Here one significant remark is to be made: the traditional Churches consider the Gospel and the teaching of the “fathers of the Church,” which is equivalent to the Gospel, to be the basis of their faith; the baptism of babies and baptism at a conscious age have not found consensus among the Churches so far. And the issue of the Lord’s Supper is a very special barrier on the way to unity. Since some Churches consider the Supper as gratitude to Our Lord for the redemptive sacrifice of Jesus Christ on Golgotha, and as a spiritual symbol of the unity of the faithful with the life and suffering of Jesus Christ; while others have a firm doctrine of the “transformation” of bread and wine into the natural body and blood of Christ. In the Catholic

Church this doctrine is called “transubstantiation,” and in the Lutheran Church it is known as “consubstantiation.” The Reformation was unable to overcome this contradiction, neither were the Ecumenical Councils.

This is another proof of the fact that it is extremely difficult to walk the road to the unity of the Church when church doctrines and dogmas often are placed above the Word of God.

In the context of the above, the statement that, despite the existence in their churches of non-biblical dogmas, they nevertheless can create a single Universal Church, sounds astonishing. From a different perspective, such statements could be perceived as a call to build a Universal Church with beliefs which contradict the main principles of the Word of God.

Unfortunately, the document does not provide any advice on how to overcome the burden of non-biblical doctrines in the Church.

## **THE LIFE OF COMMUNION IN AND FOR THE WORLD**

The Evangelical Church absolutely agrees with § 68 of the document: **“They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship.”** (Acts 2:42) The faith **“that was once for all entrusted to the saints”** (Jude 1:3) is the faith of the Church of all times.

But it is difficult for us to agree with paragraph 70, where the apostolic faith as a fixed formation is questioned, and the emphasis is placed on traditions and various religious documents of the Churches, which often are far from the teaching of Christ and the apostles, and which caused not only the spiritual decline of those Churches but also provoked confrontation between Christians.

Thus, to live in peace, even with those who break the Lord's commandments, is the rule of Christ, but it is absolutely unacceptable to establish a single Universal Church basing it on principles not from the Gospel (2 Cor 11:2-4).

Our Church also finds it difficult to agree with paragraph 76 of the document, which states: “Baptism is related not only to momentary experience, but to life-long growth into Christ.” Proclaiming equality between the baptism of babies and the conscious baptism of adults, the document consciously contradicts its own paragraph 68 and the truth of the Epistle of St. Paul to the Ephesians about one God, one faith, and one baptism (Eph 4:5). If revision of the Word of God regarding baptism has been allowed, then within other Churches numerous distortions of the truth of Christ's Gospel must be flourishing by now.

The Evangelical Church firmly stands on the basic principles of Christ and the Apostles regarding baptism and receiving the promises of the Holy Spirit, namely: **“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you”** (Matt 28:19-20) and **“Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”** (Acts 2:38)

Thus, baptism is the conscious vow of a repentant person to follow Our Lord and serve Him (1 Pet 3:21), and the vow of Christ to pour the Holy Spirit onto the faithful; it is the gift of God of God's special visits to the person at any age and with visual signs (1 Sam 10:6-7).

We agree with paragraph 80 of the document, in which reference is made to chapters 10 and 11 of the First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians, which highlights the connection between the Lord's Supper and the nature of the Church, namely: **“Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ?”** (1 Cor 10:16)

Undoubtedly, such eucharistic unity of saved people with the nature of Christ cannot have anything in common with formal unaware baptism and the participation in the Lord's Supper of unrepentant people.

Regarding paragraph 81, we can note the following: the Evangelical Church, which does not practice Liturgy, still agrees with the biblical principles of blessing and reconciling Christians which liturgical services require. May God bless Churches which practice Liturgy with strength, wisdom, and the inspiration to achieve these goals not declaratively but in the real life of Christians.

As far as the Eucharist is concerned, our Church celebrates it as a ministry of gratitude to Christ for His passion on the Cross on Golgotha, and not as the natural consumption of the Body and Blood of Christ according to the doctrine of “transformation” of bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Our Savior.

#### **MINISTRY OF THE FAITHFUL. EPISCOPATE AND APOSTOLIC SUCCESSION.**

The Evangelical Church agrees with paragraph 82 of the document, where the main principle of the Mission of Christ on the earth is proclaimed: **“just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”** (Matt 20:28)

We do not agree with the statement from paragraph 83: “Every Christian receives gifts of the Holy Spirit for the upbuilding of the Church, and for his or her part in the mission of Christ.”

Yes, these words do contain basis in the Word of God about the fact that the grace of the Holy Spirit belongs to **“all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.”** (Acts 2:39) But most Christians not only do not accept this grace of God, but have not the slightest understanding of the Holy Spirit in the Church and the personal life of every person. If that was not true, today Christians would not so massively turn towards different occult powers and would not be keen on various false teachings, paving the way for the coming Antichrist.

Undoubtedly, paragraphs 83-85 contain an idealistic version of the Evangelical model of Christ's Church on earth. And this could be another good reason for great joy, if everything was not so sad, since from these wonderful biblical truths we turn to real life for most Christians, which appears to be far from Christian values.

As far as the ordination of clergy is concerned, the Evangelical Church observes basic principles of the Word of God: Acts 20:28; Acts 6:3; 1 Cor 12:28; Eph 4:11; 1 Tim 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9; Heb 7:7.

The Evangelical Church recognizes a three-level hierarchy of ministers: deacon, presbyter, bishop. Deacons and presbyters are chosen (elected) by the Church and obtain legitimate power through ordination by a bishop. A bishop is elected at an assembly (synod) of religious ministers with the consent of his autonomous Church and is blessed (ordained) by the laying on of hands of at least two bishops.



Our Church does not accept episcopal succession, as this notion is not biblical. As long as this notion exists in the Church, the ecumenical movement will not have adequate success.

Paragraphs 102 and 103 of the document historically confirm statements mentioned here and review the sorrowful history of the division of the Church only on the grounds of the problem of primacy and proofs of statements which cannot be proved, that is, which of the Churches possesses true apostolic succession. And that which has never existed does not need to be proved.

Our Church absolutely agrees with paragraphs 105 and 108 of the document about the spiritual power of Christ in the Church and the unity of ministers who ordain others with the whole Church.

We also agree with the statement from paragraph 112 on the moral and social position of the Church in difficult and critical situations which are typical of the contemporary world.

The theme of Christian forgiveness and grace, problems of ethics and reasonable and considered cooperation with various organizations for the good of their salvation is as close to our Church as it is to the authors of the document.

Thus, taking into account the difficult moral-ethical situation in the world, our Church is very grateful to the authors of the document "The Nature and Mission of the Church" for a global analysis of the existing religious situation in the world, and for sincere reminding of the need to return to the basics of Christ's Church, which is built on two firm principles: "creatura Verbi" and "creatura Spiritus," faithfulness to the Word of God and the Holy Spirit.

But with all due respect to the content of this document, our Church cannot agree with the theses of the Canberra Statement: "The goal of the search for full communion is realised when all the churches are able to recognise in one another the one, holy... apostolic church..."

In general, we consider the document "The Nature and Mission of the Church" to be an important and valuable step towards the unity of the Christian people scattered in various denominations and beliefs.

**"For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him."** (John 3:17)

**"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God."** (Matt 5:9)