

Clarification on report #5—Shevchevenko congregation

During my last trip I visited the Shevchenkivska church of Christ and sent a report on the visit. It has been brought to my attention that my words offended the congregation and for that I am deeply sorry. I understand that some comments from my report were taken and used to convey points that would encourage harsh feelings. I certainly did not intend that to be the fruit of my report. I have conveyed these apologies to the Shevchenkivska congregation them to forgive the unintended results and I wanted them to know that I would post this correction.

I am copying the report in full that was sent so that it will not be conveyed in pieces. The report is stated and then following that the requested clarification is made.

THE REPORT...October 5, 2014

The first Lord's Day of this mission trip was spent with the brethren who worship at the Shevchevenko church of Christ. Andrew and Veronika Zhuravlev had spent many years in Gorlovka but were forced to flee to Kyiv for safety as the Russian invasion progressed. Andrew had been preaching at the Gorlovka Church but the church building was forcibly seized by the pro-Russians and the worshipping assembly was told to leave with Kalashnikov-47 automatic assault rifles pointed at them. They were told they had only two hours to clear out the things they wanted and then they have not been allowed back into the church building. The Bear Valley Biblical Institute relocated to Ternopol where it has reopened and continues their exceptional training of fulltime church workers.

The Gorlovka Church scattered to various locations in Ukraine and Andrew and Veronika found themselves in the Kyiv Region.

Recently Andrew was asked by the Shevchevenko brethren to come and preach and teach.

The Shevchevenko congregation has had a most difficult time. It has struggled with a succession of "preachers" who were more totalitarian in their approach than that of the biblical character of gentle and nurturing. Consequently there has been a dearth of teaching on the rudimentary principles of New Testament Christianity and the Lord's Church. The last "preacher" had been appointed by his predecessor and continued the lack of distinctive biblical instruction. Consequently there was a "religious group" but it did not cherish the distinctive marks of New Testament Christianity. The members knew little about basic doctrine.

After a confrontation with a group of foreign visitors last summer, the last preacher decided to leave and join a denominational group. The preacher did everything he could to persuade the entire congregation to go with him—evidencing the damning "works of the flesh" characterizing those who do not follow God's will. Such illustrates the base level upon which the congregation had functioned. Those who were left after the division were wounded and hurt.

And then Andrew "came" to Kyiv because of the war that Russia's invasion ignited. Andrew visited and was asked to speak. The congregation listened and appreciated his lessons. They asked him to continue coming and teach and preach as long as he was in "exile" from Gorlovka. For those who receive my monthly UKRAINE MISSIONS newsletter you will recall Andrew's reports on this development.

Andrew has begun teaching and is stressing leadership and devotion to God's simple doctrines found in the Scripture. His task is challenging. It is almost as if he is presenting the Truth of God to a group that has never heard it. By the discussions in the Bible class today it is as if this congregation has no knowledgeable identity of who they are or for what purpose they come together or in what activity they should be engaged. It is really amazing to consider that this congregation has been in existence for decades yet it is shrouded with ignorance!

The worship period was delightful and the fellowship was warm. I was welcomed and my sermon was received with good and honest hearts. The sermon was from Colossians 1:3-8 and focused on Epaphras and his example of devotion to God's Truth and willingness to work with diligence. I discussed the background of the Colossian heresy and how the Church in Colossae had accepted not only the Lord's commands for New Testament Christianity but they had also decided they could add novel beliefs and practices to make Christianity more accommodative and accepted to those in the world.

Afterwards the congregation had announcements of birthdays and there were sandwiches, sweets and hot tea that were shared. Several asked about my trip and where I would be teaching in Kyiv during this trip. I told them that today was the only day scheduled for me to teach.

(END OF REPORT SENT)

CLARIFICATION REGARDING THE REPORT...

The point which I would like to give clarification regarding the report, after further communication from the congregation, resulted from a comment that when asked by a stranger one of the members replied that the Shevchenkivska church was an "evangelical" organization. That comment was generally accepted by those present and presented the general acceptance of such a notion. It was this that led me to conclude there was an identity problem. After further discussion on this matter I was given this explanation for the comment:

"We would like to explain one thing to you. You were confused by the words that ____ said. That very Sunday when you visited with us s/he preached Gospel to a person who thought s/he was a Jehovah's Witness, to which ____ responded that s/he wasn't a Jehovah's Witness. S/He said s/he was a member of an evangelic church showing the contrast between the source of Jehovah's Witnesses' authority (Watch Tower teaching) and the Gospel of Christ, which is the foundation that church of Christ stands on (1st Co 15:1-4). S/He didn't tell him that we are not church of Christ but said that we're evangelic church just like Baptist denominations call themselves. Our congregation holds onto Biblical foundation as far as doctrinal matters go. We realize how extremely important it is to 'hold fast the form of sound words' (2nd Ti 1:13); it is our goal, for which we steadily strive."

Because some have used the report to sow discord I wanted to make sure I placed the full explanation for all to read who may have read the original report. I know that many more are on this list than received the report but do not know who received the mission trip reports so all will have to receive this.

Another point which I want to address is the harsh statement I wrote stating there was "a dearth of teaching on the rudimentary principles of New Testament Christianity and the Lord's Church." As brought to my attention this is harsh. I did not mean to offend by such terms and have told the congregation this very thing.

The Shevchenkivska congregation continues to meet. It was reported by some that it ceased existing when the last preacher left but the Church continued. They did lose their meeting place and had to meet in another location. But now they are able to rent one room in the building where they met for so many years. The Shevchenkivska congregation is currently a welcoming refuge for Christians who have had to flee the traumas of Russia's war. The Shevchenkivska congregation also continues distributing a large amount of Christian literature that has been stored for a number of years.

In no way did I mean to darken the lives and teachings of those who have been faithful in following the sound doctrine of the New Testament. I certainly did not want to offend any

congregation of God's People who are striving to be the pure, exclusive Body of Christ on earth. I closed the report of the day's worship with this note which I still believe is true: "The worship period was delightful and the fellowship was warm. I was welcomed and my sermon was received with good and honest hearts."

And I am happy to report that the Shevchenkivska brothers wrote to me after we had discussed these matters: "We wish you success in your godly work and Lord's blessings for all areas of your life. We'll be glad to see you again next time you come to Ukraine."