

Doctrinal Handbook of the Evangelical Congregational Church of India



By:
Rev. Lalrosiem Songate
General Director, ECCI.

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The Doctrine of the Evangelical Congregational Church of India is contained in brief format under ARTICLE II of the Constitution of the Evangelical Congregational Church of India. The following is in a more elaborate form for use by members of the Church.

I-On the Bible (Holy Scriptures)

We believe that the Holy Bible, 39 books of the Old Testament and 27 books of the New Testament is an inerrant inspired word of God and the final authority in matters of Faith and conduct.

By the Holy Bible we understand to mean those canonical books of the Old and New Testaments which have been received by the Church at all times. These books in order are as follows:

The Old Testament: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, I Samuel, II Samuel, I Kings, II Kings, I Chronicles, II Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Songs of Solomon, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi.

The New Testament: Mathew, Mark, Luke, John, The Acts of the Apostles, Romans, I Corinthians, II Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, I Thessalonians, II Thessalonians, I Timothy, II Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Hebrews, James, I Peter, II Peter, I John, II John, III John, Jude, Revelation.

These Scriptures, as given by divine inspiration, reveal the will of God concerning us in all things necessary for our life and salvation. By divine inspiration, we mean that the manuscripts of the Bible in their original forms originated from the very breath and thoughts of God and men of God were used by God to put these words into writing. Men of God were used to transmit the words into writing in such a way that they were divinely protected from committing errors in the transmission.

Therefore, we believe that the Scriptures in their original forms contain no error whatsoever. The Bible is accurate historically, scientifically, philosophically and theologically. However this does not rule out the possibility of errors in later and subsequent translations and printings.

We do not accept the Apocrypha or Church Traditions or any other sources for that matter as authoritative and there is absolutely no other source of revelation that is on par with the Scriptures; for the Bible alone is the final authority in all matters of faith and conduct.

The Bible itself affirms about its own inerrancy. The actual word "inerrancy" is not there in the Bible, nevertheless, the idea is implied in the following verses: Matt. 5:17-18; John 10:33-36; I Tim. 5:18; 2 Tim. 3:16-17; 2 Pet.1:19, 21; 2 Pet.3:16.

II-On God

We believe in one true and living God eternally existing in three persons as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, yet of one substance.

God is one yet existing in three persons. These three persons in the Godhead are one in substance, equal in essence but differ in functions. The idea of plurality in the Godhead is seen in several Old Testament passages. The word "ELOHIM" is used as the name of God in the earlier chapters of the book of Genesis. The suffix "IM" denotes plurality. The same is seen in the word "Seraphim". The term "Seraph" is singular but when the suffix "im" is added as SERAFIM it refers to more than one seraf.

In the New Testament this idea of plurality is distinctly and elaborately revealed as three persons known as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We see the manifestations of these three distinct persons at the time of Christ's baptism at the river Jordan. Jesus was being baptized in the water, the Father was speaking from heaven and the Holy Spirit was seen descending on the person of Christ (Math. 3:16-17). Yet he is ONE GOD.

God is by nature, a spiritual being, and spiritual beings have no physical shape or form. God appearing to people in physical forms in the Bible is just temporal which he took up for the moment. In the Bible God is sometimes spoken of as having eyes, hands or feet. These are also expressions used for human beings to understand. He sees all things but that does not require him to have eyes like we have.

He is indivisible, infinite in power, wisdom, love, and goodness. He is the Creator and Preserver of all things, visible and invisible. He has no beginning and has no end. From eternity past to eternity future He is GOD. There was no time in the past when he was not or a time when he was not God and there will never be a time in the future when he will be not. He will also never cease to be God. He was God, He is God and He will always be God.

God is unknowable and he can be known only to the extent that he chooses to reveal himself. God chooses to reveal himself to man through the person of Jesus Christ so that we may be able to know him. The Bible is a record of this revelation. A part from God's own initiative, there is no way for man to get to know God. In fact man, in his earthly structure, has no capacity to know and understand God fully. St. Augustine said, "If you comprehend something, it is not God."

God's greatness is also seen in his omniscience (all knowing), omnipresence (present everywhere), omnipotence (all powerful), eternal and unchanging. There is nothing that he does not know, there is no place where he is not and there is nothing that he cannot do.

He is also eternally unchanging in his love, in his holiness and in his righteousness. The love of God is satisfied in the forgiveness of sinners and the holiness of God is satisfied in the punishment of Christ on the Cross for the sin of mankind.

III-On Jesus Christ

We believe in the deity of the Lord Jesus Christ, His virgin Birth, His sinless life, His vicarious death, His bodily resurrection, His ascension, His mediatorial intercession and His personal return in power and glory.

Jesus Christ, the second Person of the Trinity is God and was with God the Father since eternity past, incarnated into human being born of Virgin Mary. His birth from the womb of Mary was not the beginning of his existence but rather a transition in the life of an eternal God.

As a human being he grew up into a perfect manhood and became acquainted with all the infirmities, temptations and sorrows of man, yet he was without sin. In fact, in becoming a human being he became the lowliest of all men, that is, a slave, so that his salvific work will be able to scoop down to the lowliest and vilest sinner. Though he was without sin, he suffered the most cruel death- the death of the cross- in order to pay for the most loathsome sinner.

In Him dwelt all the fullness of the Godhead, so that, uniting deity and humanity in one Person, He is the sole mediator between God and man. As a sinless and perfect human being he is qualified to represent and mediate man before a holy God. As God he is able to represent God before sinful human being. He is a representation of all what God is. So his own word, "He who had seen me has seen the Father." has been rightly said.

There is no question of how much of Jesus is God and how much of Jesus is man. He is 100% God as well as 100% man. There is a teaching that the spirit of Christ is the deity and the physical body of Christ is the humanity. This is also not true. Both the spirit and the body of Christ are fully God and fully man. He gave His life a ransom for all and by His death on the cross made a full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world.

When Christ died on the cross, it was God that died. Can God die? No, God cannot die. That was why God became man in the person of Jesus Christ so that he may be able to die for the sin of the world. Specifically it was the God-Man Jesus Christ that died on the cross.

He rose from the death and ascended into heaven, where he is serving as our Great High Priest and King, and must reign until all things are put subjection under Him. He shall return to the earth one day to receive his saints and to judge both the believers and the unbelievers.

IV-On the Holy Spirit

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Author of the New Birth, the Comforter, the Sanctifier and the indwelling of believers by the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is the third Person of the Trinity and hence He is not just a force or energy. The fact that He is a Person can be inferred from the fact that He can be grieved Eph. 4:30, lied to Acts 5:3, blasphemed Math. 12:31. The Spirit can also teaches John 14:26, and decides to whom to give gifts I Cor. 12:11. The Holy Spirit is the agent through whom all the actions of God are carried out.

The Holy Spirit plays a vital role in the process of our salvation. First, as the Author of the new birth, the Holy Spirit brings conviction of sin, making us to understand and see our sinfulness and our need for a savior.

Secondly, the Holy Spirit also enables us to appropriate by faith the finished work of Jesus Christ on the Cross. The Bible makes it very clear that while salvation is a free gift, the faith by which we are able to appropriate is also a gift of God. Faith is the act of appropriating the finished work of Christ on our behalf which we are able to do by the enabling power of the Holy Spirit.

Thirdly, as the Comforter, the Holy Spirit empowers us to live a Christian life. The term "Comforter" actually means "one who is called to be alongside." He comes along side of us by His indwelling presence. He helps us to understand and follow God's will, empowers us to overcome temptations and the sinful inclinations in our sinful bodies. He also empowers us to do works that are acceptable in the sight of God according to the gifts that he imparts.

Finally it is the Holy Spirit that baptized all believers in to the Body of Jesus Christ, thereby uniting all of us into one big spiritual body called the Church, the body of Jesus Christ. The baptism of the Holy Spirit is an initial one-time experience at the time of conversion and does not require any external sign or manifestations such as speaking in tongues or some ecstatic experience or feelings. It is a reference to the process by which we are made a part of the body of Christ.

The unity of the Church crosses all ethnic, cultural and denominational barriers though these are factors that have caused so much of divisions among Christians.

V- On Man

We believe that man was created in the image of God, but fell into sin and thereby incurred, not only physical death but also spiritual death which is separation from God; that all human beings in consequence of that fall are born with sinful nature.

The creation of man contradicts the evolutionary theory of Charles Darwin on the origin of species. Man was directly created by God and there is no indication of evolutionary process in the origin of man. Man created in the image of God does not imply a physical likeness for God is a spiritual being and has no physical form or likeness whatsoever. The image of God therefore has to do with the immaterial part of man.

The soul was derived from God when He breathed into him the breath of life. It is this life that makes him a living soul. The creation of man in God's image entails knowledge, righteousness, holiness, immortality and dominion over the creatures. Man is also endowed with perfect liberty of the will and having the power to chose good and evil. This is what makes man not only different but far above all other inhabitants of the world. Charles Hodge says, "He (Man) is the image of God, and bears and reflects the divine likeness among the inhabitants of the earth..."

Being a free-will agent, man chose to disobey God when he was tempted by Satan and ate the forbidden fruit. In the temptation of Adam and Eve, Satan was trying to seduce them in disobeying God's commandment and Adam and Eve had the freedom to obey or disobey. Sin is not necessarily in the eating of the fruit *per se*, but in the attitude of the heart whereby man chose to disobey God. As a consequence of his own sin, man lost the divine image in which he was created, his whole being became corrupted and he became a sinful human being.

As a sinful being, man became mortal and the process of death was activated in his body from the day of his fall. Since then it has been said that man began to die from the day he was born. He was also driven out of the Garden of Eden signifying the prospect of eternal separation from God which is spiritual death.

This sinful nature was transmitted to their children and that is how all human beings become sinners by birth. No matter how good and morally upright a person is, as long as one is a human being, he or she is a sinner and morally depraved. By his own choice, Adam became a sinner, but we, as his descendants, became sinners by birth. It is not our immoral behaviors that make us sinners; rather, it is our sinful nature that develops all kinds of immoral behaviors in us.

VI- On Salvation

We believe in the salvation of lost and sinful man through regeneration by the Holy Spirit and salvation is by grace through faith.

Salvation is basically understood as the saving of sinners from eternal damnation to obtain a heavenly inheritance as children of God. In other words, it is receiving an eternal life with God through the work of regeneration by the Holy Spirit. Salvation can be divided into three stages as salvation from the penalty of sin, salvation from the power of sin and salvation from the presence of sin.

Salvation from the penalty of sin refers to the forgiveness of sin we received through Jesus Christ by which we sinners are counted righteous. Salvation from the power of sin refers to a victorious Christian life by the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit on the basis of the work of Christ on the cross and salvation from the presence of sin refers to the time when our bodies will be redeemed from sin and corruption. The first two may be experienced either simultaneously or at different times as our understanding of the saving work of Christ deepens. The last one refers to our eternal state in heaven wherein our spiritual and glorified bodies will be totally free from the presence of sin.

There is nothing man can do to earn salvation. In fact, God never designed salvation as something to be earned by man through good works. The Bible makes it very clear that salvation is a free gift of God which is to be received by faith and faith alone (Eph.2:8). Jesus Christ paid the full penalty of our sin by his death on the cross and we are just to trust in this finished work by faith in order to be saved.

It first begins with a conviction of sin, which means the knowledge that we are sinful beings and is followed by a feeling of sorrow for our sins. Repentance is sorrow for sin, wrought in the heart by the power of the Holy Spirit. The awakened sinner is thereby made to recognize

the holiness of God, the righteousness of His law and the guilt and shame of his own perverse nature. Thus deeply humbled he turns unto God and forsakes his sins. This is what the bible calls repentance and it is the work of the Holy Spirit in us.

This is again followed by faith and it involves the knowledge and acceptance that God has accepted the death of Christ as the penalty of our sin and the result is that we are justified. There is nothing we can do about this except to accept or reject. Acceptance results in our justification whereas rejection results in our condemnation.

VII-ON THE RESURRECTION OF THE DEAD

We believe in the bodily resurrection of both the saved and the unsaved, they that are saved unto the resurrection of eternal life with God and they that are lost unto the resurrection of eternal damnation.

When the Bible speaks of resurrection, it evidently refers to a literal resurrection of the physical body. The New Testament speaks of two kinds of resurrection, the first resurrection and the second resurrection. The first resurrection has to do with the resurrection of the righteous. "Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection," (Rev.20:6). The second resurrection refers to the resurrection of the wicked, and it will take place at the end of the world. It must be remembered that the two resurrections are not necessarily a simultaneous event.

There are some Bible teachers today who teach that it is not this body that will be resurrected but God will give us a new body which our spirits will occupy. This is a tricky teaching and very close to an outright denial of the doctrine of resurrection. The fact that it is our very body that will be resurrected can be inferred from the following:

First, the word resurrection signifies a rising again, a rising of that which was buried or a restoration of life to that which was dead (Hodge). Secondly, the analogy of the resurrection of Christ and that of believers makes it very clear. In the resurrection of Jesus Christ, it was his body that was buried which came back to life. In the same way it is our dead bodies that we have buried that will be raised back to life.

Thirdly, the prophet Daniel talks about the resurrection and said that "those who sleep in the dust of the earth will wake up" Daniel 12:2. It is the bodies and never the spirits that sleep in the dust. The bodies that sleep in the dust will be raised at the resurrection.

Fourthly, the apostle Paul talks about how Christ "will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body" (Phil3:21). The "lowly bodies" is a clear reference to our physical bodies. Like an ugly worm that is transformed into a colorful butterfly, our long-dead and rotten bodies will be transformed into a glorious body by Jesus Christ.

Lastly the analogy of the seed sown in I Cor.15:35-37 is another clear indication. The seed that is sown dies and the husk rots away. Then from the small kernel of the seed comes a beautiful life-giving plant. To say that the husk that rots away applies to our body may not be a correct application. Rather, the kernel of the seed that dies and germinates in to a new plant

represents the resurrection of the body appears to be a more appropriate application of the analogy.

According to the Dispensational teaching, the first resurrection involves different stages. It will begin with a resurrection and transformation of all New Testament believers at the time of the rapture (I Thess.4:13-16; I Cor.15:51-54) and concludes with the resurrection of the tribulational martyrs and the Old Testament saints at the end of the tribulation (Rev.20:4). All those that take part in the first resurrection will be taken up into heaven where they will spend eternity in the glorious presence of Jesus Christ the Lamb.

The second resurrection or the resurrection of the dead will take place at the end of the Millennium after the final battle was fought. They are the unsaved from the beginning of human history till the time of the final consummation and they will all appear before the White Throne Judgment to receive their rewards of punishment in the lake of fire which is called the Second Death (Rev.20:11-14).

VIII-On the Spiritual Unity of All Believers

We believe in the spiritual unity of all believers in our Lord Jesus Christ, which comprises the Church, the body of Christ.

The moment we are saved by believing on the Lord Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit immediately indwells us and places us into the body of Jesus Christ. This is what the apostle Paul termed as the baptism of the Holy Spirit in 1 Cor.12:13. In the baptism of the Holy Spirit, believers are the subject, the Holy Spirit is the agent and Christ is the object into which we are baptized.

In other words, we are immersed into the body of Jesus Christ by the action of the Holy Spirit and it coincides with the initial experience of salvation. All believers without any exception are immersed/baptized into the body of Christ, and consequently all believers are one body in Christ and therefore all are members of one another. This is the Church the body of Jesus Christ where Christ is the head of this body (Eph.5:23).

This unity of all believers in Christ Jesus is essentially spiritual in nature. In this unity there is no distinction of any form for there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of us are one in Christ Jesus (Gal.3:28). All other forms of unity such as racial, cultural, denominational, political, etc. are only temporal and earthly and they will disappear one day, but the unity of all believers in Christ Jesus will continue throughout eternity.

It is a sad thing when we are more concern of maintaining our temporal unity and that also at the expense of our spiritual unity that is to last throughout eternity. We shall do well to remember that it is always God's will for believers to allow the spiritual unity to take precedence over all other forms of unity.