

## CHAPTER 3

### FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT EASTGATE

#### **Question 1: Why do you guys go on about doctrine so much (like this handbook)? Doesn't doctrine just divide?**

It seems that Doctrinal Statements in modern churches are as prevalent as they are ignored so why would we want to have yet another statement of faith and another mission statement apparently doomed to disregard? For us as the Eastgate church body, the doctrinal truths of this faith handbook are not dead orthodoxy. They are not dry words fated to dust-gathering in an obscure corner of the church office. On the contrary, inasmuch as this handbook (and the 'doctrine' herein) reflects the truths of scripture and it's relevance to us as a church, it is no 'empty word' but is in fact our 'very life'<sup>118</sup>. As John Calvin has said:

The doctrine which regulates the due worship of God, and points out the ground on which the consciences of men must rest their hope of salvation, is the soul which animates the body, renders it lively and active, and, in short, makes it not to be a dead and useless carcass.<sup>119</sup>

With regard to doctrine, we recognise that the statements written here are by fallible humans but we also recognise the doctrinal truth of God's revealed, infallible Word that this statement espouses. It is to this scriptural truth we declare our whole-hearted commitment. We do not, after all, want to be a 'dead and useless carcass'.

We consider the scriptural truths that inhere these doctrinal assertions absolute in the sense that they do not depend on anything else for their veracity except the authority of God himself. Thus they constitute true Christian orthodoxy<sup>120</sup> and form the foundation for right understanding of God. They also form the basis for true Christian unity (see below).

What is at stake in getting doctrinal understanding right at Eastgate is not a loss of abstract theologising but a 'right, true and straight'<sup>121</sup> comprehension of God, His nature, His redemptive work through Jesus (the Gospel), His opinion of humankind, His expectations of humankind and His promises of future glory and/or damnation. To ignore, disbelieve or disobey scriptural truth is to ignore, disbelieve and disobey God himself. This is, in effect, to put one's own 'spiritual' opinion above the gracious revelation of God in His word. When scriptural truth in the form of biblical doctrine is ignored, distorted or mishandled the God of the Bible becomes a god of our own making and, as the scripture clearly teaches, a god of human origin is no god at all but rather an idol. We at Eastgate do not want to be idol-worshippers because of doctrinal carelessness or ignorance.

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<sup>118</sup> Dt 32:47.

<sup>119</sup> The Necessity of Reforming the Church'

<sup>120</sup> We use 'orthodoxy' to mean 'right and true doctrine' taken from the greek 'orthos' meaning 'right, 'true', 'straight' and 'doxy' meaning 'doctrine'

<sup>121</sup> The denotative meaning of 'ortho'

Therefore, we at Eastgate Bible church unequivocally emphasise biblical doctrine because to do so is to emphasise perceptions that are grounded in reality. In a world where ideologies are as profuse as they are vapid, to emphasise perceiving as the Bible perceives is to emphasise reality. As we read the Bible and understand it we understand the true nature of the reality of God and our state before him. As we read the Bible and understand it we begin to hate the things that God hates and to love the things that God loves. Essentially, in our human finitude, as we grow in biblical knowledge we grow to see things as God sees things. This is of utmost importance because the way God sees things is the way things really are. With this in mind we now articulate some key doctrinal statements relating to Eastgate Bible Church. We are extremely grateful to the Gospel Coalition for the section 'What We Believe' which forms the bulk of this document.

## **Question 2: How can doctrine enable true Christian Unity particularly when it seems to have caused so much disagreement in churches?**

Because true biblical doctrine espouses reality and thus forms the foundation of right thinking so too the absolutes (that is, the essentials) of biblical doctrine form the foundation for true Christian unity. This is a foundation upon which true historical Christian unity has been built and through which contemporary Christian unity can be sustained. (see also FAQ 'How can things of 'first importance' be distinguished from those of lesser importance"). It is these truths which connect us with genuine Christians past and present. It is also these truths which we care-take for future Christians - we guard for our children and their children after them, (see also Eastgate Core Value: Discipleship that is Intergenerational) Contrary to popular belief all faith-views do not lead to God nor are all views equally valid when validity is a measurement of conformity to reality. In like manner all groups purporting to be 'Christian' are only biblically Christian inasmuch as they conform to a biblical view on Christianity.

The statement of this handbook seeks to articulate the essentials of Christian belief through which we are united with Christians from diverse ethnicities, societies, cultures, generations and denominations. As one preacher has put it, these are the biblical truths we intend to hold on to tightly and if necessary, die for<sup>122</sup>. While the application and cultural expression of these truths may be different the substance of them never will because the reality they espouse is intrinsically linked to the triune God who is immutable and does not change like shifting shadows<sup>123</sup>. Additionally, we recognise that there are things in Scripture that are not necessarily absolute but are matters of conviction and where such a 'disputable'<sup>124</sup> matter is clearly taught we believe in grace and freedom for believers to express their convictions within the bounds of brotherly love and the leading of the Holy Spirit. The reformation principle on unity is appropriate here as a summary statement:

'In essentials unity, in non-essentials freedom, in all things love'.

Once again though, the basis for such 'unity, freedom and love' is true biblical doctrine – doctrine rightly understood and rightly lived as we seek Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit. This is why

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<sup>122</sup> Mark Driscoll, Mars Hill Church Seattle.

<sup>123</sup> Jam 1:17

<sup>124</sup> Ro 14:1 NIV

we are so keen at Eastgate to not only *know* the Word but to *live* it as well (see the Eastgate Mission Statement above).

### **Question 3: Does that mean I can't ask question your beliefs at all?**

No. As expressed above if there really is a conformity to reality and a genuine authenticity to our beliefs then such questions, rightly asked with a genuine desire for truth, will only show that reality more clearly. Only false beliefs, like false money, have a fear of being shown to be inauthentic when subjected to testing. At Eastgate we work hard to provide a safe place where such questions, with commensurate respect for each other, can be discussed as a means of us all knowing and loving Jesus better through knowing his Word. (see also Eastgate Core Value: Preaching and Teaching that is explanatory and centred on the gospel).

### **Question 4: What is the 'Eastgate List of Issues'**

In recognition of the fact that we are an eclectic bunch at Eastgate, with a wide history in denominations, we acknowledge that there can sometimes be disagreement about certain matters. The list we keep is a catalogue of issues of disagreement that arise in the church from time to time. Whenever such issues arise our basic belief is that the Lord would have us work towards unity on these issues. We are aware however, that such 'work' often requires much time and effort in the scriptures, in prayer and in discussions (see below) - time which is not always immediately available. We therefore have a list which, in due time, we attempt to resolve. This in the future will be loaded on the website.

## Question 5: How do you resolve issues of disagreement and how can you distinguish issues of first importance?

We have thought long and hard about how Christians are to resolve disagreement given the clear admonitions by Paul to work hard for unity in Jesus and the 'new' commandment of Jesus to love one another as He and the Father love<sup>125</sup>. Interestingly unity is seen in the Ephesians passages as a sign of maturity therefore we see the resolution of disagreement as an indicator that we are maturing as a Christian community. The only immature thing about disagreement is not disagreement itself but whether such disagreement is subjected to resolution.

Too often disagreement in Christian circles is handled by ignoring such disagreement, sidelining those that have genuine concerns and/or deferring to clichéd statements about 'not being divisive' even though the division may be occurring because of false doctrine. When disagreement, poorly handled, deteriorates into car-park gossip, unloving confrontation (or no confrontation at all), a leadership vector away from the Biblical gospel or even just plain old vitriol it is often the church as a whole and the name of Jesus that looks bad.

This is appalling when one considers that Jesus himself said that the kingdom mark of true believers would be love for each other: 'by this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another'<sup>126</sup>. Thus, when we argue unlovingly as Christians, we not only hurt each other and make the church look bad but we sinfully disobey Jesus 'new' commandment to love each other.

Of course we recognise, as probably all married couples would, that love is often hard work requiring humility and, many times, repentance. Nonetheless we believe God wants us to work towards harmony and to do so depending upon His Spirit. We also believe that there is a Christian, Godly way to disagree and an ungodly way to disagree. We have put together a paper available on the website called 'Sanctification by Disagreement' which details the principles behind Godly disagreement and is essentially the theology behind the way we are to argue – a theology of disagreement. In outline the basic principles of resolution that we adhere to at Eastgate are as follows:

- It's all about the love. Not 'Home and Away' love but biblical, Golgotha love (see the Eastgate Love value). In any disagreement we must never forget our chief aim is to love and know Jesus better and to love each other better<sup>127</sup>. Every bit of knowledge and every conviction must 'hang' off these motivations just as Jesus said every prophecy and every law 'hangs' of love in Matthew 22. Motivations are many in an argument and often times distorted by pride.
- God opposes the proud. We must all be humble because inasmuch as the Spirit of Jesus dwells in believers of all intellectual and social types the Spirit may speak

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<sup>125</sup> John 15:12, Eph 4:1-13

<sup>126</sup> Jn 12:35

<sup>127</sup> Mt 22:37 - 40

through them to us. We therefore need to be humble with each other and submit to the Spirit of Jesus in each other. Even the reformers recognised the need for humility in disagreement. As a matter of fact John Calvin stated that Christians were disagreed on non-essentials especially to *keep* them humble and reliant upon the Spirit of God.

- Spiritual Truths are discerned by Spiritual People. In Corinthians Paul tells us that it is only by the Spirit we can understand truth. He is the one who inspired the bible and He is the one who brings understanding. We should therefore spend much time in prayerful dependence upon the Spirit of God especially when there is disagreement. The real battle is often fought on our knees. Not only in bringing understanding but also in dealing with sin and pride issues that disagreement often brings out.
- Has the bible spoken? The first port of call in issues of disagreement must be the 'instruction manual'. Many times our convictions are not the result of biblical exposition but rather the accumulation of traditions, assumptions and sometimes even false teaching. A simple test here is to ask oneself whether the conviction they are feeling is one derived from a biblical verse, passage or theme. If not it may be that the conviction is one based on something other than the bible. We therefore do not enter into any substantive discussion until all parties have had time to collate a biblical argument. This of course, as indicated above, must be done with a constant 'plank-check' of our own motivations and with prayerful reliance on the Holy Spirit. Once this is done we arrange a meeting to discuss the differences if they still exist as a means of ratifying each other's understanding and being able to correct, in ourselves and others, faulty or partial understandings.
- Unity of Practice. If after prayer, study and humble discussions there is still disagreement the next issues is one of practice. Does the issue result in markedly different practices and if so how can we accommodate both without detracting in any way from the doctrine of biblical authority. This is where the issue of 'first importance' and secondary importance also comes into sway. If the issue is one which does not affect church practice, such as perhaps is the case with eschatological (end times) issues, then personal conviction is encouraged so long as it is exercised with grace and love for others of different convictions. Unity, has expressed above in the Christian Unity question, is unity in things of first importance – the person and Gospel of God in Jesus (see Christian Unity question above).
- Issues of First importance. There are many reasons why disagreement might be an issue. Many times such disagreement, perhaps in the preaching or community group study, can simply be 'let through to the keeper'. Other times it should be challenged. But how to know when? As alluded to above, we believe there are

issues of first importance which must be taken seriously while there are other issues of secondary importance which can be left in the 'agree to disagree' basket. Some guidelines in deciding whether an issue is worth challenging are as follows:

- How close is the issue the gospel? In 1 Cor 15 Paul states that the gospel is of first importance. Therefore anything distorting, denying or otherwise substantially affecting the story of Jesus should be challenged.
- How much of the issue is biblically based and how much is based on tradition, church practice or personal preference. There are many ways in which personal convictions are cemented – not necessarily biblical or Spiritual ways. Is this an issue because you believe from the bible it to be an issue or from something else i.e. have you got a verse?
- If an issue is raised where's the love? Jesus tells us that every law 'hangs' on love for God and love for each other. An important indicator of where the issue-raising is going is to ask 'how will this improve my love for God and love for the other?' In other words, 'is love my motivation', is God's reputation or my reputation at stake?

No church will have perfect agreement on every issue, no real church anyway. Nonetheless, just as various types of people (the outcasts of the day) went to King David in the desert with their various beliefs, baggage and hurts and 'were all united under one King' we too want to be united under our King and committed to his cause. Issues that do not distort this understanding; that is, do not distort the gospel, should not therefore cause division especially when we consider Jesus is sanctifying our understanding as well as our behaviours. Therefore we can trust that so long as we are all united under King Jesus we will all one day 'attain to the unity of the faith and of *the knowledge* of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ'<sup>128</sup>

### **Question 6: How should I proceed when I have a concern about the church?**

Please consider everything above and if you still believe there to be a cause here worthy of attention please do not keep such a concern to yourself. It could well be that the Lord is showing you something we as leaders or congregants cannot see ourselves. Some helpful steps at this point might be:

- Consider the principles of Godly disagreement above: love, humility, Spirit seeking, Biblically referencing, consequences in practice and first importance considerations.
- If an individual is concerned, such as during preaching or CG leading or anything else, approach that person first.

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<sup>128</sup> Eph 4:13. Emphasis ours

- If warranted approach the leadership. Mode here is important but we are happy with face to face contact, email or letter.

### **Question 7: Can I come to your church if I don't generally agree with your statement of faith or your mission?**

Absolutely. Everyone is welcome to attend our church service so long as there is mutual respect for each others beliefs. However, insomuch as there is significant disagreement with the doctrinal statements contained here, there cannot be true unity as Christians and therefore formal membership will not be available to those who cannot agree with the statement of faith. Additionally it would not be wise to seek membership if there is fundamental disagreement with Eastgate's mission, vision and values as these will underpin all of the church's ministries. Having said this we welcome the opportunity to discuss issues of doctrinal disagreement or even disagreement about the church's mission for the purposes of edification and growth so long as it can be done graciously.

### **Question 8: Why have you used the term 'inter-denominational' rather than the standard term 'non-denominational'.**

We welcome and encourage those who agree with our statement of faith to worship with us as included fellow believers, we recognise the convictions of other denominations and seek to agree on the essentials and permit freedom in the non-essentials. The Macquarie Essential Dictionary provides guidance on the selection of the term 'inter-denominational': inter- a prefix meaning 'between', 'among', 'mutually', 'reciprocally', 'together' which sums up nicely an answer to this question.

**Question 9: At Eastgate you strongly emphasise doctrinal clarity and yet you practice both paedobaptism (infant baptism) and credobaptism (confessional, believers baptism). Doesn't that mean you are trying to have it both ways and are being a bit hypocritical with the whole doctrinal purity thing?**

We acknowledge that it is a little strange for a church to practice both types of baptism. However it is important to realise to note what are saying and what we are not saying by practicing both forms of baptism.

Firstly what we are saying:

- The sacrament of baptism is important and taught many times in the scriptures.
- The sign (the ceremony, the ritual itself) does not save or make one righteous before God, only faith in the work and person of Jesus Christ does that.
- That there is disagreement and that fault with the disagreement lies in us not the Holy Scriptures.
- That the mode and time of the baptismal sign, while an important issue, is not important enough for the church to divide over.
- There are so many other areas of agreement at Eastgate, particularly in areas of what Paul called 'first importance' (see the handbook for further details), that there are greater Kingdom advantages to staying together and practicing both then there are in dividing.

We are NOT saying:

- 'Unity at any cost' and that the issue is one we have solved by adopting some sort of unbiblical middle ground; that is, somehow accepting the bible teaches both - we are all agreed it does not.

Instead we acknowledge that one or the other of the parties is wrong in their interpretation and that this error is not important enough at this time to divide over.

Furthermore, we are acknowledging our own weaknesses in not being able to arrive at a unified position and we are saying the error lies in us not the scriptures - the scriptures which contain the words of life. With this in mind we ARE saying that, in terms of church purity, the wrongness on one side or the other is a pimple compared to some of the cancers that are prevalent in modern church life and that we are better able to deal with these cancers together than apart.

We are therefore saying, in summary, that though at least one of the parties are wrong we are together depending on the grace of God in Christ alone to save us from this error we have now accepted together as a church.



Furthermore we are praying that together, in humble need of His ongoing grace, the Lord Jesus will be pleased to advance His kingdom using Eastgate Bible Church - in spite of our disagreement and our error (Guys I think this statement is important because, in effect, by agreeing to practice both despite seeing error in the other side, we are together accepting the error on the part of the Church- hence the need for grace)

### **'10 agreements about Baptismal Disagreement at Eastgate'**

1. **We all agree Baptism is a sacrament / ordinance** and should be practiced out of obedience to Christ's command.

2. **We all agree that the sign, the ceremony, the practice of Baptism, does not, in and of itself, bring salvation.** Salvation, as for the thief on the cross, is by trusting Jesus by grace alone through faith alone.

(Note\* Paedobaptists at Eastgate believe that baptism, in the form of the sign of sprinkling water upon a baby of believing parents, indicates membership in the covenant community by virtue of their birth to believing parents. It does not in anyway signify saving faith on the part of the infant.)

(\*Credobaptists and Paedobaptists both believe the baptism of confessing believers is an external sign or symbol of the inward reality of being washed clean (regenerated) from sin and saved into oneness with Christ Jesus. Most Credobaptists also see the immersion into the baptismal waters as a sign of oneness with Christ in his death and resurrection. Neither though, sees the act of baptism as a saving act in itself. Salvation is by grace alone through faith alone. )

3. **We all agree new believers, out of obedience to Christ's command and as an outward symbol of inward regeneration and cleansing, should be baptised.** The mode that a new believer wants applied is to be left up to individual conscience after receiving appropriate teaching (Baptism Classes), their own study of the scriptures and their own prayerful consideration before the Lord.

**4. We all agree that believing parents have a responsibility to teach their children the ways of the Lord in humble dependence upon the Holy Spirit** in the hope that the child will one day, through a conscience-decision on their own part, turn to Jesus and be saved. Such a responsibility should include praying regularly for their children, teaching their children the scriptures (in such things as family devotions) and modelling Christ Jesus to the child as Godly parents. In general this then means the children of believing parents are more blessed because of the ongoing exposure to Jesus and his teaching than children who are not. At Eastgate this commitment is expressed through the act of dedication for credo-baptists and is a part of the covenant ceremony for paedo-baptists.

**5. We all agree that no parents or individuals will be 'forced' into baptising their children at Eastgate.** Neither will those that have been baptised as infants, who have a believable confession of faith and a conviction of the validity of that baptism, be 'forced' into baptism as a teenager or adult. All members will be reminded of the importance of this sacrament while acknowledging the disagreement at Eastgate over this issue. All members of Eastgate will be encouraged to humbly seek the scriptures for themselves and, with prayerful consideration depending upon the Holy Spirit, come to a conviction for themselves on the issue.

This does not preclude parties on both sides -with graciousness, humility and charity - speaking of the reasons for their convictions and the importance thereof. Nor does this preclude the preaching staff, who from time to time, will come across verses pertaining to baptism in their sermon preparation, preaching from their own humble convictions on the matter - provided appropriate deference is given to the 'other side' and to the fact that both forms of baptism are practiced at Eastgate.

**6. Given the difference of conviction on baptism at Eastgate, we all agree baptism ceremonies / services will always be announced at least three weeks** in advance so that those of strong conviction can choose not to attend that service if they so desire.

**7. We all agree that, wherever possible, those church leaders of one persuasion or another on the issue of baptism, should conduct and lead the ceremony of baptism according to their own conviction on the matter.** i.e. a Credobaptist should not baptise a baby and a Paedobaptist who does not believe in immersion should not conduct a baptism by immersion. Where a paedobaptist or credobaptist leader is not available, one will be sought from a trusted fellowship elsewhere. With this in mind we all agree any mature leader(elder) at Eastgate can conduct a baptism service (what do you guys think of this, dont think we discussed this one)

**8. We all agree that while it is lamentable there is disagreement on this issue at Eastgate (and indeed in the wider church beyond Eastgate) we also agree that the practice and mode of Baptism is not an issue of first importance.** This is not to say it is not important at all, we believe, on both sides of the issue, that it is. But it is not as important as other areas where we as a church are profoundly agreed. Issues such as the Glory of God in Christ, the Gospel of Jesus and the need for holy living (see our statement of faith in our Information Handbook).

Because the disagreement does not effect the Gospel, and for the sake of the steady advance of that gospel through our interdenominational church, we are committed to working together towards the propagation of the gospel to all people everywhere. We are also committed, as a fellowship, towards working towards greater unity on this and other issues of traditional disagreement. This is for the sake of the unity and purity of the church and for the glory of Christ's name who himself calls us to be one with Him as He is one with the Father and to be ready for His return.

**9. We all agree that the other church sacrament / ordinance - communion - and the issue of children participating, is as important and weighty as Baptism.** Here though there is greater unity at Eastgate. We all agree that communion should only be taken by those who have a credible confession of faith and evidence of this in their lives: for children we are agreed that parents are the best judge of this. Therefore parents at Eastgate are strongly encouraged to teach their children about the sacrament of communion and prayerfully assess their children's confession of faith in Jesus before allowing them to participate in the Lord's table.

All confessing believers at Eastgate, adult and child alike, are welcome to the table remembering the duty to examine oneself before doing so. Those who do not have such a confession should not participate in communion. From time to time classes on both sacraments will be held at the church and families are encouraged to attend - especially when a child is expressing interest in communion and/or baptism and parents feel that the child has a credible profession of faith. The structure of such classes will give appropriate and considered time to each side of the issue as well as the considerations of practicing both at Eastgate.

**10. We all agree that official membership at Eastgate will be based upon a confession of faith,** and a credible witness to this confession in conduct. Attendants at Eastgate will not be refused membership based on the mode and time a person has received the baptismal sign. Attendants who have a confession of faith but have not been baptised and have no conviction regarding either stance will be strongly encouraged to seek the Lord in the scriptures on this matter and come to a position of their own.

**11. We all agree that the sign of Baptism is a wonderful sacrament / ordinance** given by the Lord Jesus to signify the deeper reality of the miracle of salvation and fellowship in the community of God called the church. As such all believers are encouraged to search the scriptures themselves regarding this sacrament and come to their own convictions on the matter.

**Resources:** There are many resources one could google on this issue and much discernment is necessary. The first resource any Christian should use, as we have used, is the bible remembering that despite the many disagreements of the 'experts' the Lord God has promised us the Holy Spirit Himself to help us discern the bible rightly. No Christian should ever, therefore, turn away from coming to a conviction on issues such as this one because the academic world (or we as leaders!) cannot come to agreement. Instead one should commit to study, prayer and dependence upon the Spirit of Jesus to learn what God would teach them - no academic qualifications necessary!

This does not in any way mean those who the Lord has gifted to teach and to learn at higher theological institutions should be ignored - just that they, like us, can be wrong. Here the Berean principle from Acts is worth recalling, that 'they searched the scriptures' to see if the things they were hearing from Paul were right. We too should search the scriptures ourselves when we hear respected people teaching to 'see if these things are so'. Furthermore we should not miss out on the blessing of faith-inspired obedience to God's holy word because of confusion - especially if we have only read goggled articles and not the scriptures themselves as a part of prayerful study.

Nonetheless some teachers we respect, out of the many available on the internet, succinctly articulate the two baptismal positions practiced at Eastgate:

#### **Covenantal Paedo Baptist**

<http://media.thirdmill.org/mp3-32/eBAP.mp3>

#### **Credo Baptist**

[http://www.christianessentialssbc.com/messages/message\\_2008.asp](http://www.christianessentialssbc.com/messages/message_2008.asp)

Written copy available from Church Staff in Grudem's Systematic Theology

### **Question 10: Why do you have a constitution?**

The constitution is a legal requirement for us as an associated incorporation dealing with non-profit finances. It is also a way of establishing an appropriate and formal structure for the functioning of church.