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DOUBT

What It Is—and What It Isn't



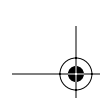
It's surprising how many Christians prefer not to talk about doubt. Some even refuse to think about it. Somehow, admitting to doubt seems to amount to insulting God, calling his integrity into question. It is quite understandable that you might feel this way about doubt: on the one hand, you may think that admitting to doubt is a sign of spiritual or intellectual weakness; on the other, you may be reluctant to admit those doubts to your friends, in case you upset them, perhaps damaging their own faith.

Many Christians thus suppress their doubts. They think that it is improper to own up to them. Or they are afraid that they will look stupid if they do. Maybe they are worried that their pride or self-esteem would suffer. Yet one of the reasons why so many Christians have difficulty in coping with doubt is that they confuse it with two quite separate ideas, which at first seem similar but are actually rather different.

In the first place, doubt is not *skepticism*—the decision to doubt everything deliberately, as a matter of principle.

In the second, it's not *unbelief*—the decision not to have faith in God. Unbelief is an act of will, rather than a difficulty in under-





standing. Sometimes we feel as if there is an “old Adam” within us, trying to sabotage our faith. We need help to overcome our old nature and its unbelieving outlook.

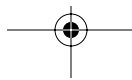
Doubt often means asking questions or voicing uncertainties from the standpoint of faith. You believe—but you have difficulties with that faith, or are worried about it in some way. Faith and doubt aren’t mutually exclusive—but faith and unbelief are.

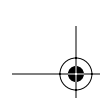
Doubt is probably a permanent feature of the Christian life. It’s like some kind of spiritual growing pain. Sometimes it recedes into the background; at other times it comes to the forefront, making its presence felt with a vengeance. A medical practitioner I knew once remarked that life was a permanent battle against all sorts of diseases, with good health being little more than an ability to keep disease at bay. For some people the life of faith often seems like that—a permanent battle against doubt. It is helpful to think of doubt as a symptom of our human frailty, of our reluctance to trust God. Let’s develop this by thinking about how people come to faith.

COMING TO FAITH—WITH UNRESOLVED DOUBTS

One way of understanding conversion runs like this: what stops people from coming to faith in God is doubt; after wrestling with these various doubts and overcoming them, the way is clear to come to faith. Coming to faith thus happens once all doubt has been cleared out of the way—faith excludes doubt!

Now it is quite possible that some people do come to faith this way. However, most do not. Experience suggests that a rather different way of understanding conversion is more reliable. Many people feel deeply attracted by the gospel, despite their doubts. On the one hand, their doubts are real and hold them back from



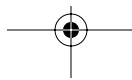


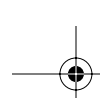
faith; on the other, the pull of the gospel is very strong and draws them toward faith. In the end, they decide to put their trust in God and in Jesus Christ, despite unresolved anxieties and difficulties. They are still in two minds. They hope that their doubts and difficulties will be sorted out as they grow in faith. The seventeenth-century philosopher Francis Bacon commended this way in his *Advancement of Learning*: “If a man will begin with certainties, he will end in doubts; but if he is content to begin with doubts, he will end in certainties.”

An analogy may make this clearer. Suppose you are at a really boring party one evening, when you meet someone you feel drawn to. You get to know this person and, as time goes on, realize you’re falling in love. However, you hold back from allowing the relationship to develop any further. After all, you don’t really know the other person that well. There might be some dark side to their character. Can you really trust them? And, like many people, you may have a sense of personal inadequacy: what, you wonder, could this other person possibly see in you? Could they ever possibly fall in love with you? You are profoundly attracted to them, yet you hold back. You have doubts. You’re in two minds about it.

Now in this situation, you have two options. You can still hold back and become a prisoner of your doubts and hesitations. If we all did that all the time, we’d miss out on many of life’s great adventures and surprises—including both falling in love and discovering the Christian faith. Or you can take a risk. You can say, “I’m going to give this a try, and hope that my doubts and anxieties will be resolved as things go on.” And so you allow the relationship to develop.

Many people become Christians in that kind of spirit. They are aware of the enormous attraction of the gospel; they are deeply





moved by the thought of Jesus Christ dying for their sins; they are excited by the great gospel promises of forgiveness and newness of life. Or they have experienced glimpses of transcendence and just *know* that there is a God out there. They decide to reach out in faith and claim these as their own. As for their doubts and anxieties? They hope that they will be resolved and put in their proper perspective as their relationship with God develops. “I believe; help my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24).

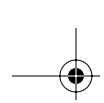
If you’re in this situation, wrestling with doubt will be an important part of your life as a Christian. The way in which you came to faith sets an agenda for you. It decides what things need to be sorted out. You’ll want to think about the same kinds of questions that arise in any personal relationship. Can I really trust God? Does he really love me? What about my personal inadequacies—does he know what I’m really like? And there may be other doubts about the gospel, about yourself, about Jesus Christ and about God himself. This book aims to deal with that agenda. But your doubts in no way invalidate your conversion experience—you really are a Christian!

DOUBT—A REMINDER OF HUMAN SINFULNESS AND FRAILTY

If we are going to set doubt in perspective, we need to see ourselves in the right perspective first. Above all, we need to appreciate the limits set on what we can know. We are finite, sinful human beings, and that limits what we can be sure about. In this section we will explore this theme in some detail.

The gospel is about redemption—about the transformation made possible by Christ, through the Spirit. We have been set free from sin through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Re-

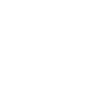
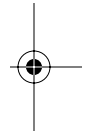


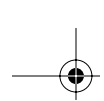


demption, however, is not something that can be achieved in an instant! The story is told of a little girl who asked a bishop whether he was saved. “I have been saved from the penalty of sin, I am being saved from the power of sin, and one day I shall be saved from the presence of sin,” he replied. Salvation takes time! It is a process, in which we mature in faith, like a seed growing into a plant.

In classic evangelical thought, a useful distinction is made between justification and sanctification. In justification, we are declared to be right with God; our status changes, as we become an adopted child of God; we are given the gift of the Holy Spirit as a surety or pledge of being a Christian. Sanctification, however, is a long process, in which we are gradually conformed to the likeness of Christ. It cannot happen overnight. The fact that it takes so long does not point to any failing on God’s part but indicates how deep-rooted sin is within us.

Martin Luther used a phrase that is very helpful here. He talked of the Christian as being “righteous and sinful at one and the same time.” By this, Luther meant that Christians are righteous (in that we stand in a right relationship with God) but are still sinful (in that sin has yet to be completely eradicated from our nature). To use a military analogy, the decisive victory over sin has been achieved with your conversion; nevertheless, mopping up operations must continue, as isolated pockets of resistance are overcome. Sin may have been defeated in our lives; nevertheless, it remains a lingering presence. We are deluding ourselves if we pretend that we have no sin (1 John 1:8; 2:1). Ignoring sin, or pretending it’s not there, points to an inadequate understanding of the seriousness of human sinfulness. For Paul, grace and sin are like two powers, battling it out within us. We know what the final outcome of that battle will be—but while it



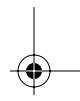


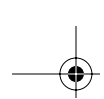
lasts, we cannot ignore its effects—*one of which is doubt.*

Doubt reflects the continued presence and power of sin within us, reminding us of our need for grace and preventing us from becoming complacent about our relationship with God. We are all sinners, and we all suffer from doubt, to a greater or lesser extent. Our relationship with God is something we need to work at, conscious that in doing so, we are working with God and not on our own (Philippians 2:12-13). Sin causes us to challenge the promises of God, to mistrust him. (Note how mistrust of God is the “original sin” of Genesis 3:1-5.) Only by causing us to turn away from God can sin regain its hold over us. Faith is not just a willingness and ability to trust in God—it is the channel through which God’s grace flows to us. It is our lifeline to God. It is like the trunk of a tree, transferring life-giving sap from its roots to its branches—it both supports and nourishes their growth. Break that link, and the branches wither (cf. John 15:1-8). If sin has any strategy after your conversion, it is to break that link, to deny you access to the promises and power of God—and to allow itself to regain its former hold over your life.

Doubt, then, needs to be seen in its proper context—that of our struggle against sin (Hebrews 12:4). It is an integral part of the process of growing in faith and encountering resistance from our old natures in doing so.

Yet there is more to it than this. It is not entirely correct to describe doubt as simply due to human *sinfulness*. It is also a reflection of human *frailty*. We are human beings, and quite frankly, this means that we operate under limits. There are many things that we cannot do and many things that we cannot see—simply because we are human, not divine. We’re like grasshoppers, trying to make sense of a vast universe (Isaiah 40:22). We’re so small; how can we





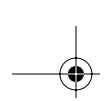
ever hope to make sense of something so immense? How can our tiny minds take in something so vast? That's why the idea of revelation is so important. If we were left to find out about God using our own limited resources, we wouldn't get very far. And God comes to our aid by making himself known. He takes the initiative.

The severe limitations placed on human capacities by the fact that we are creatures, not God, has been a major theme of Christian theology down through the centuries. God is bigger than we think—and our minds struggle even to begin to wrestle with him. Protesting against slick and too-easy notions of God in the fifth century, Augustine wrote of the inability of the human mind to comprehend God fully. If you can comprehend it, he remarked, it's not God. To comprehend is to grasp something in its totality. But what if it is too great, too deep, for us to do this? What if we are confronted with the deepest of oceans, and we can only skim its surface? If we cannot see something in its totality, we are not going to be able to make complete sense of it.

There is a story about Augustine worth telling here. Augustine is particularly remembered for a massive treatise he wrote on the mystery of the Trinity—the distinctively Christian understanding of the richly textured nature of God. Perhaps in the midst of writing this book, Augustine found himself pacing the Mediterranean shoreline of his native North Africa, not far from the great city of Carthage. While wandering across the sand, he noticed a small boy scooping seawater into his hands and pouring as much as his small hands could hold into a hole he had earlier hollowed in the sand. Puzzled, Augustine watched as the lad repeated his action again and again.

Eventually, his curiosity got the better of him. What, he asked





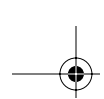
the boy, did he think he was doing? The reply probably perplexed him still further. The boy informed him that he was in the process of emptying the ocean into the small cavity he had scooped out in the hot sand. Augustine laughed. How could such a vast body of water be contained in such a small hole? But the boy shot back his reply: how could Augustine expect to contain the vast mystery of God in the mere words of a book?

The story illuminates one of the central themes of Christian theology and spirituality alike—that there are limits placed on the human ability to grasp the things of God. And because we can't fully grasp something, we sometimes doubt that it is true. We misinterpret our inability to understand something as a sign that it is not true, or not real. In reality, the situation is very different. We are confronted with many things in the world—including the Christian gospel—that are just too big for our minds to embrace. And we have to learn to live with that tension—not doubting, but trusting.

Thomas Aquinas, writing in the thirteenth century, stressed that God was obliged to speak to us using images and analogies. Why? On account of the weakness of our intellects. Our minds aren't big enough to comprehend God. We cannot fully understand God and his ways; as a result, God reveals himself partially (but accurately and adequately), up to the limits of our abilities. This reflects a limitation on our part, not God's.

John Calvin, writing in the sixteenth century, set out a principle that is helpful here: "God accommodates himself to our weakness." In other words, God knows our limitations and adapts himself accordingly. We cannot see the full picture, so God presents us with a reliable guide to its contents, hitting the high points. No more is possible, given the limitations placed on us. Of course we





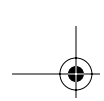
have difficulties in trying to understand God and the world—but this doesn't mean that our faith is misplaced!

An example of how the limitations of being human affect the way we see things may help make this point clearer. Suppose you want to see the stars, or catch a glimpse of the Milky Way. You can't do this in broad daylight. You have to wait until it's dark. The stars are still there during the day; it's just that you can't see them. Our eyes just aren't discerning enough to pick up their light during the day. When it's night, our eyes adjust to allow us to see their tiny pinpoints of light, coming from the depths of our universe, highlighted against the blackness of the night. The stars don't need darkness to exist—but we need darkness if we are to see them and convince ourselves that they are still there!

So it is with God. Just as our eyes can't see stars during the day, so our minds can't take in the fullness of God. It's the way we see things, rather than the way things actually are, which is the problem here. (Or, to use the technical language of philosophy for a moment, the issue is *noetic*, not *ontic*.) Being human places limits on what we can see, know and understand.

We need to understand what those limits are because in the end, doubt arises partly on account of our unrealistic expectations about certainty. We think that we ought to be able to *prove* with absolute certainty that certain things are true—for example, that God exists. But it's just not like that. Being prepared to accept our limitations is an essential part of growing in faith. There's a paradox here: it's only when we use our reason that we begin to appreciate its limits. The great French writer and philosopher Blaise Pascal put this rather well in his *Pensées*: "Reason's final step is to realize that there are an infinite number of things which lie beyond it. It is simply feeble if it does not get as far as realizing that."





This principle applies to just about everything, not just to religious beliefs. In 1932 Albert Einstein wrote a letter to Queen Elizabeth of Belgium, in which he commented, “As a human being one has been endowed with intelligence to be able to see clearly how utterly inadequate that intelligence is when confronted with what exists.” The point Einstein made is critically important. The world is something of a mystery, and the fact that we can make any kind of sense of it is something of a miracle. And there are limits to what we can understand, just as there are limits to what we can prove. And in such situations, we have to trust that we can get things more or less right.

It is only natural that we should want to see and know more. But that’s overlooking our limitations. It’s like saying, “Because I can’t see the stars in the daylight, they’re not really there.” That’s confusing our perception of the situation with the reality of that situation. The way we see things isn’t necessarily the way things really are.

Doubt often reflects a sense of unease about the way in which experience, reason, feeling and faith relate. Sometimes they seem to be out of step with each other—so which do we believe? Which is right? The central insight here is that our frailty and weakness prevent us from fully comprehending the way in which these relate to each other. As the great Victorian preacher and novelist George MacDonald once pointed out, “Everything difficult indicates something more than our theory of life yet embraces.” Faith assures us that, though we do not see the picture totally, we nevertheless see it reliably (1 Corinthians 13:12).

