

Questioning Your Doubts: A Harvard PhD Explores Challenges to Faith

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The Good in Asking Questions

“The only stupid question is the one you do not ask.” I overheard a postdoctoral student making this remark to a new graduate student joining our lab for a rotation. From the hesitant look on the student’s face, I could sense his reluctance to believe this axiom. However, trust in this statement is the difference between an accomplished researcher and a neophyte. This concept also differentiates the researcher in command of lab safety from the accident waiting to happen.

I believe in questions both inside and outside the laboratory. Questions sharpen our thinking and provide a way to test subjective experience. Questions are a way to connect with other people and accept their help. Questions are a protection against confusion, oversights and exploitation. Questions provide definition, clarity and focus. Problem solving, especially in the practice of science, relies on questions.

Good questions solve problems of understanding. Good questions can show us what information we lack. Scientists will often ask a series of questions to step their way through a problem with each question bringing more focus to their thinking.

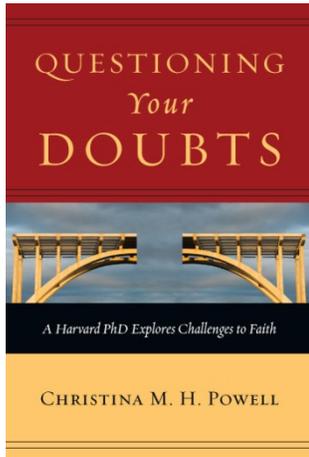
If questions can help scientists find new cures for diseases and send a man to the moon, then perhaps questions also have a place in the realm of faith.

The doubts that help you solve problems will move you in a positive direction toward the solution. Doubts that tear down your confidence or destroy your faith take you down the path to confusion. Asking questions of your doubts permits you to differentiate between the two. The apostle Paul did not push away his fears. He endured past them. He developed a faith strong enough to handle human weakness (2 Cor 12:9-10). God did not remove his thorn in the flesh, end the persecution or silence his critics. However, God showed Paul a faith beyond his doubts.

Doubts can be a gift capable of leading you to the truth you were missing. They can function like the mirror in a car, helping a driver to see an approaching car entering his blind spot. Sometimes a certain make of car retains a blind spot invisible to the driver even with the help of mirrors. In the same way, we will stumble upon situations where the best a question can do is reveal our limits. Not every question has an answer. But a question is often a good place to start in attempting to solve a problem.

Ultimately, questions can help us resolve our doubts instead of letting them fester.

– Adapted from chapter four, “Solving Problems with Questions”



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“Sure, I question my faith. But I also question my doubts.”

Christina M. H. Powell knows what it’s like to grapple seriously with challenges to faith. As both an ordained minister and a biomedical research scientist with a Harvard PhD, she has spent her life exploring the questions that arise when faith and reason seem to clash. She has come to conclude that questioning our doubts can in fact lead to renewed confidence in our beliefs.

Powell examines the roots of these doubts and explains how to move beyond them in her accessible new book, *Questioning Your Doubts: A Harvard PhD Explores Challenges to Faith*. She provides an apologetic that doesn’t overlook the importance of facts and knowledge while at the same time points out the limits of human rationality. Powell writes, “To be intellectually responsible, Christians must be willing to face the difficult questions about their faith. However, intellectual responsibility also requires a commitment to question doubts in all the various forms in which they may arise.”

Powell addresses questions such as:

- Is faith plausible in a world where science can explain most phenomena in the universe?
- How can asking questions help us uncover the truth?
- What role should rational thought play in a person’s journey of faith?
- Does God ever use doubts to speak to us or draw us to himself?
- Is it okay to question God’s goodness when faced with injustice, natural disasters and disappointment?
- What is the proper balance between utilizing our intellect and recognizing its limits?
- Where do our doubts come from?
- How can we respond to suffering and help those who are grieving?
- How should we respond when we come up against the limits of science or theology?
- Can we ever be content while there are still unanswered questions?
- What should we do if pain or tragedy casts doubt into our hearts?
- What happens when we feel disillusioned or our hopes are shattered?
- How can we build our faith when we come up against doubt?
- To what extent should we involve our Christian community as we face private doubts?
- What does an authentic life of faith look like?
- Can doubting ever be beneficial?



Scientist, Minister, Apologist

As both a Harvard-trained biomedical research scientist and an ordained Christian minister, Christina M. H. Powell lives in the tension between faith and reason. Her medical expertise about physical health is balanced by her ministerial care for spiritual health.

Powell conducted her doctoral research at the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute and Harvard Medical School. After receiving her PhD in virology, she continued her work at Harvard by performing research on bioinformatics and genetics. At the same time, she held a position as a research fellow at Massachusetts General Hospital, which has been consistently ranked as one of the best hospitals in the United States. She has also worked as a research associate at Boston University.

Today, she is an apologist who speaks on bioethics and issues of science and faith at conferences, churches and college campuses around the country. When at home, she frequently preaches to the 1,200-member congregation of her church in New England. She was also invited by the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) to speak at the joint annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature.

Powell has been published in a variety of scientific journals and has written and edited materials for leading companies in the fields of pharmaceuticals, biotechnology and information technology. She regularly contributes articles to the *Pentecostal Evangel* and is the author of columns in both the *Enrichment Journal* and the official Assemblies of God online newsletter for women in ministry. She also serves on the board of trustees at the University of Valley Forge in Phoenixville, Pennsylvania. Her latest book, *Questioning Your Doubts: A Harvard PhD Explores Challenges to Faith*, examines the nature of doubt and provides a well-researched Christian apologetic that acknowledges both the rationality of faith and the limits of science.

Learn more about Powell and her new book at questioningyourdoubts.com.

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author of *Questioning Your
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“Christina Powell . . . proves that there is nothing odd about the brilliant relationships of science and Christendom, women in science, and women and the church.”

— **Mary Poplin**, author of *Is Reality Secular?*