

EXCERPT

IVP Books

Faith in the Shadows *Finding Christ in the Midst of Doubt*

September 11, 2018 | \$16, 183 pages, paperback | 978-0-8308-4543-9

Worshipping Doubters

I love being a pastor and am called to be a pastor, but at times, doubt comes more naturally for me than faith. When a child dies, I don't see a hidden joy and design behind the tragedy; I see nonsense. I don't feel divinely comforted; I feel rage. So if you need your pastor to make it all make sense, to tie all the suffering nonsense up with a tidy bow, then I will disappoint you.

There are both a blessing and a curse here. The curse is that many things I've been told are "supposed" to come naturally for pastors do not come naturally for me. The blessing is that my situation has forced me to develop habits that can shape and sustain me as I live a life in service to a faith that does not always come naturally. What my faith lacks in ease it makes up for in grit, which is just as well because easy faith comes with its own set of problems: "Just as an athlete with natural gifts may fail to develop the fundamental skills necessary to play his or her sport after the talent fades, so people naturally disposed to faith may fail to develop the skills necessary to sustain them for a lifetime." My bags are packed for the long haul. I hope yours are too. Because at some point in your life, I suspect you too might find yourself on the fringes of faith, and as you stand there in the shadows you will need grit. You will also need to know you are not alone and many stand with you.

When we walk down the long hallway of Christian faith, we find that many of our saints also had an inner skeptic. Think of Sarah, laughing at God's promise to give her and Abraham a son in their advanced age. Think of Moses, the man who would argue with a burning and talking bush, insisting God had the wrong guy. Think of the despair in the lament psalms. Think of the apostles scoffing at the prospects of an empty tomb—the great apostles, first skeptics of the resurrection! Their skepticism has something to teach us, which leads us to the story of the Great Commission.

Jesus, newly risen, gathers his apostles and sends them out into the nations, making disciples and baptizing in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But few recall what precedes this. The eleven apostles journey to a mountain in Galilee. They've been told Jesus will meet them there. They reach the top and there he is—the resurrected Christ! And what happens next is so incredibly strange: "When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted" (Matthew 28:17 NIV).

Wait. How could someone stand on top of a mountain, stare into the eyes of the resurrected Christ, and still doubt? How is that possible? This is a haunting question, to be sure, but it invites another question:

Why do most of us not know this story?

Given how deeply so many struggle with skepticism and doubt, how is it possible the church has not told us this story over and over? How is it possible so many people think their doubts disqualify them from faith when some of the apostles looked into the eyes of the resurrected Christ and still doubted?

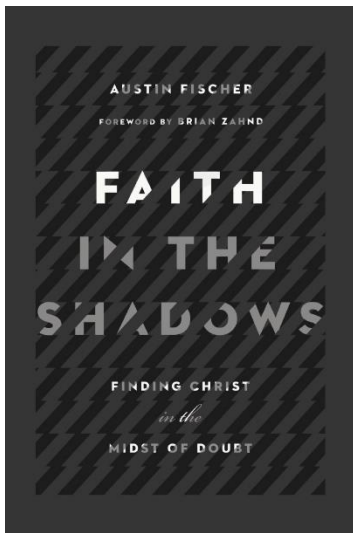


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Around a third of people who leave faith do so because of skepticism and doubt. Over a third of young adult Christians feel they cannot ask their most pressing questions in church. And over a third of young adult Christians feel Christians are too confident they have all the answers. Add these numbers and something becomes very clear and very sad. Doubt makes people abandon faith, but people don't abandon faith because they have doubts. People abandon faith because they think they're not allowed to have doubts. People abandon faith because, intentionally or unintentionally, they've been forced into an impossible, unbiblical, binary choice: you can have Jesus or you can have doubts, but you cannot have both.

So what will it be? Jesus or our doubts?

Thanks be to God, this is not a decision we have to make, and this brings us back to that mountain where the risen Christ stands with the eleven apostles.

Translating the Bible into English can be a bit tricky at times, and Matthew 28:17 is one of those times. Some difficult interpretive decisions have to be made in translation, and many translations make it sound as if some of the disciples are worshipping and some are doubting—as if ten are worshipping and one is doubting (we're looking at you, Thomas). But a strong argument can be made, on grammatical and narrative grounds, that it is best translated, "When they saw him, they worshipped him, but were not sure."

In other words, it's not that some worship while some doubt—it's that all worship *and* all doubt. They all worship, even though they're uncertain. Two thousand years ago, Jesus gathered a group of worshipping doubters on a mountain, sent them out, and the world was never the same. And this is why no one should ever think they must choose between Jesus and doubt. The church is built on people who lived the contradiction.

—Taken from chapter one, "Graffiti: An Invitation to a Rebellion"



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Austin Fischer is the lead pastor at Vista Community Church in Temple, Texas, and the author of *Young, Restless, No Longer Reformed*. Read Austin's blog at purpletheology.com. Follow him on Twitter: @austintfischer.

You Are Allowed to Have Doubts

What role does doubt play in our faith and lives?

Austin Fischer: The experience of doubt is an inescapable part of the experience of faith, and yet we often struggle to faithfully experience our doubt. On the one hand, we are ashamed of our doubts and taught doubts are damning. On the other hand, we are proud of our doubts and indulge in an avant-garde skepticism that metastasizes into an anemic faith or indifferent agnosticism.

Why did you decide to address the topic of doubt in *Faith in the Shadows*?

Austin: I wrote this book because I think Christian faith teaches us to be faithful with (not ashamed or proud of) our doubts by being honest with our doubts. I wrote this book because we need to be unflinching and ruthless in our appraisal of how deep our doubts can run, but also steadfast in our belief that Jesus is the embodiment of all that is true, good, and beautiful. I wrote this book for people who want to find that middle way between phony certitude and indifferent agnosticism.

How is this book a fresh approach to the topic of doubt?

Austin: We can only be faithful with our doubts by being honest about our doubts. Per my comment above, I think this approach is somewhat distinctive in the sense that many works of apologetics seem to be written by people who have either never doubted or never doubt anymore. They are red meat for the already convinced. So I think this is a very honest book, written in the belief that doubts honestly confessed and considered can be a means to faith and not an obstacle to faith.

What are the main things you want readers to take away from *Faith in the Shadows*?

Austin:

- You don't have to choose between Jesus and doubt.
- The goal of Christianity is not faith but love.
- It is better to be wrong about Jesus than right about something else.
- People who lose faith are not those who have doubts but those who think they are not allowed to have doubts.

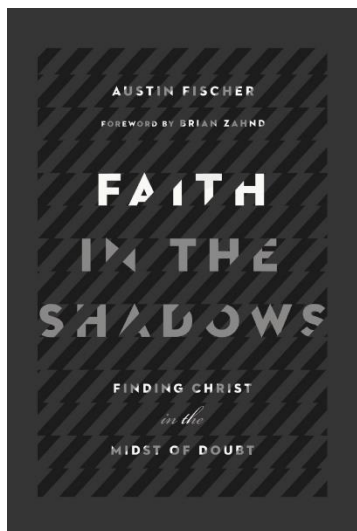


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People don't abandon faith because they have doubts. People abandon faith because they think they're not allowed to have doubts. Even as a pastor, Austin Fischer has experienced the shadows of doubt and disillusionment. Leaning into perennial questions about Christianity, he shows that doubt is no reason to leave the faith—instead, it's an invitation to a more honest faith.

"But Some Doubted."

"With Faith in the Shadows, Austin Fischer steps out of the shadows and into the limelight of leading contemporary American Christian pastor-theologians. This book is a must-read for every pastor who struggles with issues of Christian faith in an increasingly doubt-filled and confused world. The line between hardcore fundamentalism and insipid theological liberalism is a fine one these days; most people fall to one side or the other. Fischer helpfully points out the path between and beyond them."

—Roger E. Olson, Foy Valentine Professor of Christian Theology and Ethics, George W. Truett Theological Seminary, Baylor University

"Fischer writes with a wonderful combination of keen intellect and unflinching honesty. He hits all the necessary topics, from fundamentalism to theodicy, while drawing on our best Christian thinkers, from Fyodor Dostoevsky to David Bentley Hart. But what Fischer does best is invite the reader into his own struggles with doubt. . . . Ultimately, the hero of Fischer's book is not the brilliant Christian apologists (though we appreciate their fruitful labors) but the beauty of Christ's love that is the only credible answer to interrogations of doubt."

—From the foreword by Brian Zahnd

"'But some doubted' is one of the most jarring expressions in the entire Bible. After hearing Jesus, after watching Jesus, after knowing Jesus up close and personal, after his crucifixion and the apocalyptic moment of his resurrection, some of the disciples still doubted. How could that be? How could those who were so close to Jesus doubt anything about him? That's why Austin Fischer wrote this book, and it's a book for that kind of doubter: the one who knows about Jesus and has experienced Jesus, but still wonders—who still finds gaps instead of connections, who still limps after having run with the saints. In his deceptively perceptive exploration, Fischer focuses on the 'hypocrisy of certainty'—that confidence where none should be had. Honesty demands we admit our doubts; honesty is what this book is about."

—Scot McKnight, Julius R. Mantey Professor of New Testament, Northern Seminary

"For those of you acquainted with pain and doubt, Austin is definitely the pastor you need in your life! And for those of you who pretend so hard that you have no pain and doubt, Austin is definitely the pastor you need in your life! I live in both categories regularly, so I'm glad I got to feast on his wisdom for a few hundred pages while I read Faith in the Shadows. Austin gave me permission to think, to cry, and to be. And for that I am extremely grateful. Now is your turn to enjoy this beautiful collection of stories and invitations, reminders and experiences, Jesus and us. Enjoy."

—Carlos A. Rodríguez, pastor and founder of The Happy NPO, author of *Drop the Stones*

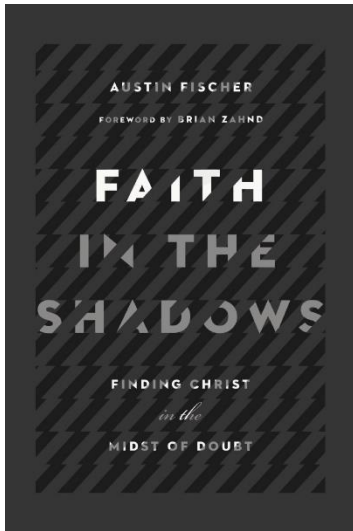


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"As I was completing my PhD studies, I found myself living in liminal spiritual space and walking on the shoals of skepticism. What is more, my recognition that any number of Christian pilgrims had walked a similar rough-hewn path before me did little to buoy my sagging spirits and to buttress my nagging doubts. Would that Austin Fischer's Faith in the Shadows had appeared some twenty years earlier! Be that as it may, Fischer's book is both a barb and a balm—it calls us to be honest before God and assures us that skeptical saints do not scare God. My hope is that this timely, lively book will be widely disseminated and thoroughly ingested, as it will help us hear and join a swelling chorus declaring, 'Lord, I believe; help my unbelief.'"

—Todd D. Still, Truett Seminary, Baylor University

"Plainly put, this is a superb book. Austin Fischer offers thoughtful, well-informed, and deeply personal help for any Christian who, like Jacob, finds themselves wrestling with God. Thank heaven, doubt does not discredit faith. Doubt does not discredit faith! Faith in the Shadows invites all of us into a community of worshipful doubters who have found the freedom offered by Jesus to sit at his feet and ask questions."

—Bruxy Cavey, pastor of The Meeting House, author of (Re)Union



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