

# Dealing with Doubt

## GBC Youth Workers Conference

25 Jan 12

### What is Doubt?

**Not Scepticism** (a decision to doubt everything deliberately) **nor is it Unbelief** (a decision not to have faith in God) but **rather doubt is voicing uncertainties from the standpoint of faith**. Faith and doubt may mutually co-exist ('Lord I believe, help my unbelief' Mark 9 v 24 – a man had tasted Christ and found him immensely attractive but all sorts of niggling doubts remained)

**Doubt is opportunity to grow in faith** and understanding rather than something to panic about; in one sense it is probably a permanent feature of the life of a Christian. It can be a healthy thing.

**Doubt reflects the continued presence and power of sin** within us and the need for grace. It is a means by which we struggle against sin (Hebrews 12 v 4)

**Doubt also reflects human frailty**. We are creatures not the Creator. Doubt is a function of the unease we all feel about the way in which we all experience the world through our reason, feelings, faith. Deep in us is a longing for absolute certainty, absolute security. But absolute certainty is reserved for a very small class of beliefs (e.g. 2 plus 2 = 4 which ain't going to tell you the meaning of life!). Absolute security can only be found outside ourselves (in the Creator). Anyone who wants to talk about the meaning of life has to make statements based on faith not absolute certainty (atheist, agnostic or believer).

To believe in God requires an act of faith – as does the decision not to believe in Him. **Martin Luther "Faith is a free surrender and joyous wager on the unseen, untried and unknown goodness of God"** ('Taste and see that the Lord is good' – its an action, an activity!). Faith has 3 main elements: Trust in God, Understanding More about Him and Obeying Him

**Biblical Terms for Doubt** The NT doesn't use one single word to express 'doubt' but rather a range of words to illustrate different aspects of doubt:

**1. Hesitation** Matt 28 v 17 'some doubted' (DISTAZO) They 'held back'. Simon Peter in Matt 14 v31 is another example. Peter hesitated to trust Christ. Hesitation betrays a lack of trust.

**2. Indecision.** Matt 21 v 21. Jesus points out the need not to doubt. In Romans 4 v 20 Paul says of Abraham that he trusted God and didn't waiver. (DIAKRINO = to argue with) i.e. Abraham didn't argue with God.

**3. Double minded.** James 4 v 8. Hesitation and indecision lead to a lack of progress. It's the failure to resolve an inner conflict of being in 'two minds' about an issue.

**4. A State of Mind.** 'Stop doubting and believe' John 20 v 27. Greek verb is a present imperative. Its not 'don't doubt on this occasion' but rather 'stop doubting once and for all, keep

believing!' Faith and Doubt are BOTH states of mind. Doubt is the constant attitude of questioning God whilst Faith is the constant attitude of trusting God.

## **Two Biblical Images of Doubt**

**Walking in the dark:** We don't see the whole picture, only God does. 1 Cor 13 v 12. Indeed this side of glory we will never see the full picture and have to live with contradictions and confusion. Doubt often arises through being frustrated with this grappling with confusion and contradiction. (Your word is a lamp to my feet, a light to my path. Psalm 119 v 105)

**A Rough Sea:** James 1 v 6. Doubt causes a lack of stability and loss of bearings. Life becomes as miserable as seasickness. Only God's faithfulness is the anchor. (Heb 6 v 18-19)

## **Who's Problem?**

**Doubt can be our problem.** Many Christians find themselves troubled by doubt and sometimes guilty about doubt. We feel as if we are letting the side down, letting God down. Loads of God's people have suffered and expressed doubt. Moses, Jeremiah, the Psalmists. (Ps 42 v 9-10; Ps 139 v 1-12)

**Doubt can also be the problem of those we minister to.** When dealing with doubt it's very important to remember that we are all different, there is no 'one size fixes all' magic bullet. Certain temperaments are more susceptible to the problem of doubt than others. (e. g. TW a perfectionist troubled by doubts and lack of assurance for years). Some may pre-disposed to anxiety, worry. Our backgrounds can also affect our faith. So to help someone it's important to understand them as individuals.

It is all too easy to go on the 'front foot' and become quite confrontational with those who doubt or express doubts. What is needed is compassion with a view to restoration. Often we can be reacting to a sense of personal rejection when we need to be digging deeper – in both our own hearts and that of the person who is struggling with doubts. Think of the way Jesus responded to doubt with Thomas and others. *(Identify in Groups some of the main Causes of Doubt)*

**Causes of Doubt** There are several **causes of doubt** and it could be that in any given circumstance there is a mix of one or more of the following:

**Circumstances Doubt** (suffering)

**Sin Doubt** (moral failure or compromised relationships) can be the underlying cause. Read the person as well as the problem! Doubt may be a smokescreen to avoid Christ

**Intellectual Doubts** (Does God exist; Issue of Suffering; Can you really trust the Bible?; Did resurrection really happen?)

**Cultural Doubts** (Irrelevant to modern life, gospel doesn't seem to work)

**Personal Doubts** (Assurance, Lack felt experience of God (Ps 42 and 13), Failure to live as a Christian, Has God really forgiven me?)

In end all comes back to Person of God (Christ) and His Word. It is normal to have doubts, in fact it can be healthy and a cause of growth eventually. Don't suppress your own or other person's doubts but discuss them. Be aware that in some cases doubts can be a convenient peg to hang unbelief and a rejection of Jesus upon and a smokescreen to avoid following Jesus.

### **Dealing with Doubt**

- Discuss with someone
- Address and resource the issue
- Submit doubts to the Lordship of Christ (Isaiah 40 v 13 – at the end of the day we are not God!)

### **Discuss**

In what ways can we help people (and ourselves) reinforce faith against doubt?

### **Resources**

- **If you could ask God one Question** (see also [www.christianityexplored.org/one-question](http://www.christianityexplored.org/one-question))
- Tim Keller '**Reason for God**'
- Lee Strobel '**The Case for Christ**' also <http://www.leestrobel.com>
- **Christian Research Institute** <http://www.equip.org/categories>
- **UCCF Website** <http://www.bethinking.org.uk>

### **Question Time**

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