

What should I do if I have doubts?: A Leader's Guide

Doubt is generally not a word or concept that is discussed within Christian circles. It can sometimes be considered to be a weakness or a flaw in your faith. Yet the reality is that all Christians experience times, seasons and stages of doubt in their Christian journey. Even Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemene seems to doubt his call to the cross, and yet he persists in his calling. If doubt is an inevitable part of our Christian walk, then it is important for us to discuss it. It is important for us to distinguish between the different kinds of doubt. Some doubt is ok in that it honestly is wrestling with the Christian faith. This kind of doubt can lead to a strengthening and a clarity which actually helps us in the long run. Sometimes doubt is bad for us. Some doubt is oppressive and overwhelming and stops us from stepping forward in faith. While we certainly acknowledge the reality of doubt we also recognise the greater powers of hope and faith. Doubt is something that we will certainly face but we cannot let it to control or dictate our walk with God. Rather through prayer and trust we should come to a place of taking our doubts to God and in turn trusting that He has a plan that will ultimately work together for good.

Focusing Questions

1. If you doubt, does that mean you are a weak Christian?
2. How can we overcome our doubt?
3. Is doubt ok or is it always bad?

Outcomes

1. Not at all, doubting is inevitable, but we cannot stay/live in doubt, we must learn to have faith during these times.
2. Doubt does not simply vanish, but through faith and perseverance and the community of believers around us we can find hope
3. Some doubts can be ok in that they grow and strengthen our faith; other kinds of doubt are bad in that they rob us of what we are called to.

Key Verses

- Mark 9:24
- Luke 22:42
- James 1:3
- Romans 5:3-5
- John 20:24-31

Notes

What should I do if I have doubts?: Bible Study Plan

Tuning In

Read the story of Jesus appearing to Thomas (John 20:24-31). Discuss the way that Jesus responded to Thomas. What does this tell us about doubts and God? Are there some lessons we can learn about the heart of God and our questions from this? Doubts are something we have all faced at different times. You may want to discuss with your group some of the doubts you have had. Go through the group and discuss some of the big fears and doubts that we face as Christians. Is there a difference between good kinds of doubt and bad kinds? Sometimes doubt is actually damaging to us. But most times doubt is a tool of reasoning that helps us understand what we believe.

Exploration

Make a list of the characters from the Bible who doubted in one way or another. Their doubt may have been against God, against His promise or against themselves (e.g. Abraham, Gideon, Moses, Isaiah, Jesus, Disciples, Paul). What we see is that nearly everyone who God uses goes through some kind of doubt. Discuss the significance of this in regards to following God.

Read the story of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane (Luke 22:42). What kind of struggle is Jesus going through here? What kind of stress is he facing that would produce drops of blood? What is it that finally enables Him to continue (trust in God's ultimate plan and will)? Discuss some of the people whose doubt actually hindered them from what God wanted (E.G. Zechariah, Saul). Obviously doubt is not always a good thing; there is a dark kind of doubt which robs us from all that God has called us to do and to be.

Going Further

As doubt is something that we will face, discuss some of the tools that we have to deal with it. What are they ways that we can dispel doubt or at least overcome it in some way? You may want to look at things like reading the Bible, trusting in God's promises, gathering with community, learning from others, prayer and ultimately hope and faith. Discuss with the group certain doubts that they overcame and how they came to that place.

Reflection & Taking Action

Take some time to write down some of the doubts that you may have. These could be spiritual doubts, philosophical, social, emotional etc. Write them down on a piece of paper and spend some time reflecting on your own journey with doubt as well as the different characters who struggled with doubt in the Bible. Over the coming week, keep this piece of paper with you and learn to pray, wrestle and ultimately give the doubt/s to God in prayer. You also may want to print a copy/email of the essay that Christian author Brian McLaren did on Doubt which can be found Here: (<http://www.brianmclaren.net/emc/archives/resources/doubt-the-tides-of-faith-written.html>) This may be a good way for people to debrief and think through what they have discussed.

"Doubt: The Tides of Faith" – Brian McLaren

Doubt. It's like a spiritual drought, a starless night of the soul, a low tide when faith seems to have retreated forever. Nearly all of us experience these dry, dark, difficult times when God doesn't seem real and it's hard to keep going, much less growing. Sometimes these low tides of faith are connected with events ... the death of a loved one, a broken relationship, the loss of a job, a prolonged illness, questions raised by a book or professor. But sometimes they seem to come out of nowhere; it's sunny and bright outside, but inside you feel dark, cloudy, grey, empty.

As a pastor, I have to deal with matters of faith and doubt on a daily basis. But it's not just other people's faith struggles I have to face; I experience my own high and low tides of faith even in the midst of an active ministry. Through it all I have learned that doubt can be a doorway to spiritual growth.

Before becoming pastor of Cedar Ridge Community Church here in the Baltimore-Washington area, I was a college teacher in a secular university. I was struck there by how superficial many of our Christian answers are in light of the profound questions being asked. Ever since, I have wanted to help Christians have a deeper, more thoughtful faith, and I have wanted to help spiritual seekers get good answers to their probing questions to help them come to a faith that is honest, vibrant, and growing.

The church I serve is composed of about 55% people who are new to a committed Christian faith. One of the great things about these people is that they haven't learned how to be dishonest yet, spiritually speaking. For example, I remember how one woman, a growing Christian for several years now, came up to me after church one Sunday and said, "Brian, please pray for me. I'm going through one of those stages again when I don't believe that God exists." Really, although that kind of honesty is rare, those kinds of doubts aren't rare at all. I'll bet some of you are nodding your heads right now, saying, "Yes. I've been there" – or "I'm there right now."

When committed Christians come to me to talk about their doubts, one of the first things I say to them is this: doubt is not always bad. Sometimes doubt is absolutely essential. I think of doubt as analogous to pain. Pain tells us that something nearby or within us is dangerous to our physical body. It is a call for attention and action. Similarly, I think doubt tells us that something in us ... a concept, an idea, a framework of thinking ... deserves further attention because it may be harmful, or false, or imbalanced.

Maybe you think I'm suggesting that doubt can actually be virtuous. I suppose I am – but not always. There is a dark kind of doubt, an exaggerated and self-destructive kind of doubt that leads to despair, depression, and spiritual self-sabotage. I think of it like this: an imagination is good, but imagination out of control is called psychosis. Fear is healthy, but fear out of control is called paranoia. Sensitivity is a wonderful gift, and anger is a necessary emotion, but sensitivity or anger out of control can lead to depression. Doubt is the same way. Out of control, it becomes unbelief, a hard heart, an arrogant or defeatist cynicism. But in balance, it is our Geiger counter for error. Without it, we'd be gullible, naïve, stupid ... not great spiritual qualities! It's a lot like guilt. Francis Schaeffer used to say that guilt was like a watchdog – useful to have around to alert you to danger. But if the watchdog turns and attacks the homeowner, it needs to be restrained and retrained.

So, if you ask, "Is doubt good or bad?" I'd have to answer, "Yes." It can go either way. Frederick Buechner expresses this ambivalence about doubt beautifully: "Whether your faith is that there is a God or that there is not a God, if you don't have any doubts you are either kidding yourself or asleep. Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving" (Wishful Thinking).

I have found this to be true in so many ways in my own life. For example, I am constantly getting emails and letters from people who read my book *Finding Faith*. Many of them have been hardened agnostics and atheists all their lives, and many others have been Christians who have "lost their faith." But God has used the book to draw them into a spiritual search. They tell me that I understand and address their questions or that the responses I give to their questions are so much

more helpful than the “easy answers” they’ve heard in the past. In every case, the only reason I’m able to help them is because I’ve had the same questions – doubts, in other words – that they have had, and I have refused to pass on answers that didn’t work for me. As Buechner said, my doubts kept me moving.

I think of it like this: all Christians are committed to lifelong spiritual growth. That means that five years from now, your set of beliefs will hopefully be different from today’s ... your beliefs will be more fine-tuned, more tested, more balanced, more examined. What causes you to examine a belief and test it – against the whole background of Scripture (not just a proof-texted verse taken out of context), against the wise thinking of the Christian community at large (both now and through history), and against the realities of your experience? It’s that something inside you isn’t at rest about a belief ... something in you doubts that belief. By doubting it, and then examining it, you can either call it a keeper because it passed the test, discard it, or adjust it.

For example, when I was a boy, I was taught a version of the Christian faith that saw science as “the enemy.” To be a good boy in my Sunday school, I had to believe that the earth was very young, that the whole fossil record was a hoax, that biologists and archaeologists were in a scientific conspiracy against God, and that sort of thing. I believed that until I was in high school, but then I was overcome by doubts. The scientific evidence against that belief system seemed so strong. This caused me to really begin thinking and reading and questioning. I was given the freedom to do that, and the result has been a vigorous faith that has grown for the last 30 years – firmly rooted in the Bible, but not afraid in any way of the findings of science. I realized that my problem wasn’t with what the Bible says, but with what some Christians said the Bible says. As a result, I feel free to question “dogma” from either the church or science – because I believe that God wants me to seek the truth, and because everybody – preachers and scientists alike – can be wrong. I actually assume that right at this moment I’m wrong in hundreds of my beliefs, and I hope that God will keep leading me to doubt those beliefs so I can embrace better ones.

Some people might disagree. They might ask, “Well, won’t that openness to doubt lead to spiritual instability and insecurity?” I’d respond by asking the opposite question: couldn’t an unwillingness to question lead to a false security that would be even more dangerous? For example, imagine its 1860, and you’re a Caucasian Christian in the American south and you are taught in church that dark-skinned people are inferior and therefore should be “our” slaves. The Bible is used to buttress this belief as a moral absolute, and to doubt it is seen as treason against not only the state but also the church. Don’t you think a person would be a better Christian for doubting that belief? Or think of Galileo back in the late middle Ages. He doubted the church teaching (“proved” absolutely by the Bible) that the sun rotated around the earth. Would he have been a better Christian – not to mention astronomer – if he had refused to doubt?

The science/faith issue is a major stimulus to doubt, but I think you’ll agree, it’s not the biggest doubt-instigator. That distinction would have to go to the problem of suffering and evil. You come into work and check in with CNN online, and you read about another shooting in Columbine, Wedgewood, Atlanta, or Dallas, or you see still photos of the latest earthquake in Turkey or Taiwan, and you can’t help but ask, “How can a good and all-powerful God let these terrible things happen?”

Another major doubt-inspirer is bad behaviour among Christians and churches: the shoddy behaviour of the religious frequently raises doubts about the legitimacy of the Christian faith. That’s huge, for churched people as well as unchurched. Another is the question of what happens to people who don’t believe. It feels so unjust and uncompassionate when some Christians seem almost glib in their willingness to consign most of the human race to hell. The very fact that caring Christians grow to really love their neighbours makes them doubt this calloused, glib attitude toward their neighbours by preachers like myself. Sensitive Christians feel there must be a better answer.

If you came to me with any one of these tough issues, the very last thing I’d want to do is offer you a short, easy answer. To do justice to your doubts would involve us developing an authentic relationship, engaging in real conversation, and going through a rather lengthy process. In each case, I think I’d begin by affirming the good thing that you are after – truth, authenticity, honesty,

compassion, justice. Then, rather than giving answers, I'd help you devise a number of possible answers; I'd help you create options. Then, together, we'd evaluate the options in light of Scripture, experience, things we've read or heard from wise people. Instead of coming in as the big teacher with all the answers, I'd try to come alongside you as a companion in the search for those good things – truth, honesty, justice, and all the rest. And this is very important: I'd try to help you keep praying through the process, because ultimately, faith isn't just about answers or concepts – it's about admitting that many of life's greatest truths are going to be mysteries to us, due to the limitations of our tiny intelligence. It's about reaching out to God to guide us, and asking for God's help so we can be honest, good-hearted seekers. That's what child-like faith is, in my opinion. It's not gullibility or intellectual laziness, but asking questions and having an insatiable curiosity for truth, and reaching out to someone who knows more than we do.

That's why I am so convinced that doubt can be a doorway to spiritual growth. Unfortunately, like most avenues of growth, it is often painful. Intellectual pain is an underrated cost of following Christ. If I didn't care about following Christ, I wouldn't care so much about being honest, seeking truth, facing reality ... I would be more tempted to simply go with the flow, take the easy way, maybe anesthetize my intellectual pain instead of persevering through it toward the truth.

If you're going through that kind of intellectual pain right now, again, I want to encourage you to pray about it ... to lay it all before God. You see, the kind of dependence on God that you are exercising now, in the midst of intellectual uncertainty and confusion, may be the purest kind of faith found on planet earth. It involves an act of will and courage which I think must be far more valuable, maybe even heroic, than we normally realize. In addition, I would encourage you to find a circle of friends with whom you can be transparently honest. I remember once during my college years pouring out my doubts to a good friend. I doubted the Bible, Jesus, the value of the church, my salvation, the whole thing. He listened, and I'll never forget what he said: "Brian, right now, none of this looks real to you. But sitting across the room from you is a friend whose faith is strong right now, and I can see that God is bigger than your doubts. So if you need to, you can rely on my faith for a while, and I know we'll get through this together." His presence and friendship helped me outlast my low tide of faith.

One other thing I want to do for you, if you are going through a low tide of faith. I want to encourage you to step up to a new level of Christian thinking by investigating some new authors and speakers. Obviously, if the thinking you're already being exposed to were sufficient to address the questions you're asking, you wouldn't have a problem. The fact that your faith is struggling means that you need some new teachers. That means at low tide you have to accept the challenge to think more, not less, to think deeper, not shallower. So, it might mean you're ready to read C. S. Lewis and Peter Kreeft, Phillip Yancey and Romano Guardini, Lesslie Newbigin and Nancey Murphey, St. Augustine and Blaise Pascal, Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Walker Percy and Thomas Merton. You've probably heard the quote that goes something like this: a mind that stretches to take in a new thought never shrinks to its previous dimensions. In times of doubt, there's no way around it: you're going to have to do some stretching.

But again, isn't that the way it ought to be? Shouldn't a growing Christian have a growing understanding? Isn't a vibrant, honest, tested faith worth some intellectual pain? In *Finding Faith* I talk about this in some detail. I describe how faith seems to grow in a kind of iterative, ascending spiral that has four stages. I call the first stage simplicity, where everything is simple and easy, black and white, known or knowable. Then there's complexity, where you focus on techniques of finding the truth – since the scenario has gotten more complex. Then there's perplexity, where you become a kind of disillusioned learner, where you doubt all authority figures and absolutes, where everything seems relative and hazy. I used to call the fourth stage maturity, but a friend pointed out it would be better called humility, because in stage four you come to terms with your limitations, and you learn to live with mystery, not as a cop-out, but as an honest realization that only God understands everything. You carry out of stage four a shorter list of tested and cherished beliefs that you base your life on and a lot of your previous dogmatisms are now held more lightly. In a sense a person keeps finding faith and then becoming frustrated with it and in a sense losing it, and then finding a better version of it, and so on, maybe like a software upgrade....

That's what has happened for me. At this stage in my life, I have sifted and re-sifted, and some beliefs I've had to release, while others have proven themselves as "keepers." This is where Jesus is so wonderful and helpful to a person whose faith is in low tide, because Jesus looked at the whole religious system of the Pharisees, which was enormously complex and full of inconsistencies, and in essence, he doubted it. He sifted out a lot of clutter, and boiled all the rest down to some beautiful essentials ... like loving God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength, and loving your neighbour as yourself. I would rather have someone be sure of those few essentials, and live by them, than have them be sure of a million fine points of systematic theology, and not live by Christ's call to love.

I sometimes think that our churches are like California, built on a San Andreas fault of suppressed doubt. Under a beautiful surface, the pressure of unexpressed, unresolved doubt is building for more and more people, and sooner or later, the whole landscape will crack and crumble. The situation is intensified by this precarious point in history in which we find ourselves, this transition between a waning modern world, and an emerging postmodern world. As I see it, all of us have been disciplined in a thoroughly modern version of Christianity, and here we are in the middle of a transition to a postmodern world. As a result, our modern apologetics and systematic theologies seem increasingly out-dated for those of us who are more postmodern people. That's why I believe we are approaching a time of real upheaval, with people raising new postmodern questions that modern Christians haven't begun to answer yet.

But here's where faith comes in – a faith that leans on God himself, and not on our own understanding, including our own theological understanding. We have the challenge of believing that good answers are out there, if we only have the courage to press through the intellectual pain of questioning, seeking, learning, and stretching. I believe Jesus when he said he'll never leave us or forsake us – and that includes even when we question. Or as Paul said, even when we are faithless, God remains faithful. It's ironic: the freer I am to doubt my specific beliefs, the more free I become to hold on to that personal faith in God. At the point where the tide of faith seems the lowest, if we hang on and don't give up, we'll see it come in again.