

Session 4: Overcoming Doubt

WCR Summer Elective: God's Will & Making Decisions

- ⇒ Definitions of Doubt: to waver (in two minds), hesitate, be uncertain, distrust. "Doubt is a state of mind in suspension between faith and unbelief." --Os Guinness (p. 26)
- ⇒ Doubt is not unbelief, but it is on the pathway towards unbelief.
- ⇒ Doubt can be beneficial in seeking answers to questions and reinforcing faith if an individual continues to seek God, pursue Scriptural truth, and stay connected to the local church.
- ⇒ If one turns from the Lord, rejects Scriptural truth, and neglects the local church, doubt can lead down a dangerous pathway towards unbelief.
- ⇒ Scripture does not give a 10-step strategy to overcoming doubt. It simply says, "Do not doubt."
- ⇒ Doubt is a complex struggle that requires wisdom and patient love and mercy. While doubt may be difficult to overcome, there is substantial healing in Jesus Christ.

"To believe is to be 'in one mind' about trusting someone or something as true; to disbelieve is to be 'in one mind' about rejecting them. To doubt is to waver between the two, to believe and disbelieve at once and so to be 'in two minds.' This two-ness or double-ness is the heart of doubt and the deepest dilemma it represents. The heart of doubt is a divided heart." --Os Guinness (p. 23)

"The divided mind or double-mindedness of doubt affirms belief in God, but questions God's character or ability. Most of the New Testament references pertain to such double-mindedness. The functional certainty of receptive faith allows for mental and emotional questioning, reservations and uncertainty." --James A. Fowler (<http://www.christinyou.net/pages/doubt.html>)

Examples of Doubt

The Fall (Gen 3), Abraham & Sarah (Gen 18), Moses (Ex 3-4), Elijah (1 Kings 19), Zechariah (Luke 1:5-22), Peter (Matt 14:22-33), Thomas (John 20:24-29), Disciples (Matt 28:17), M. Luther, C. S. Lewis, F. Schaeffer.

Doubt as a Curse for Disobedience

"But if you will not obey the voice of the Lord your God or be careful to do all his commandments and his statutes that I command you today, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you . . . Your life shall hang in doubt before you. Night and day you shall be in dread and have no assurance of your life." Deut 28:15,66

Praying in Faith and Not Doubting

And Jesus answered them, "Truly, I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, 'Be taken up and thrown into the sea,' it will happen. 22 And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith." Matt 21:21-22

And Jesus answered them, "Have faith in God. 23 Truly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be taken up and thrown into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will come to pass, it will be done for him. 24 Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours." Mark 11:22-24

If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways. James 1:5-8

Showing Patient Love and Mercy to Doubters

But you, beloved, building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life. 22 And have mercy on those who doubt; 23 save others by snatching them out of the fire; to others show mercy with fear, hating even the garment stained by the flesh. Jude 1:20-23

Faith and Doubt

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<http://www.christinyou.net/pages/doubt.html>

- a. The functional certainty of receptive faith is founded upon belief in God, and therefore not functional when there is unbelief and rejection of God.
- b. The functional certainty of receptive faith is not functional if we consider it impossible, unlikely or doubtful that God will function faithfully and sufficiently in accord with who He is.
 - (1) The divided mind or double-mindedness of doubt affirms belief in God (a), but questions God's character or ability (b).
 - (2) Most of the New Testament references pertain to such double-mindedness.
- c. The functional certainty of receptive faith allows for mental and emotional questioning, reservations and uncertainty.
 - (1) When we are living by faith that is receptive and available to God's function in our lives:
 - We don't know where God is taking us into the unknown and uncharted territory.
 - We don't know where this adventure will end.
 - We don't know what God will do next.
 - We don't know how God is going to work this out.
 - We don't know when this situation will be settled.
 - We don't know why God is allowing this circumstance or why God is acting as He does.
 - (2) The situation where we find ourselves is indeterminate and problematic. We are questioning, uncertain and perplexed. We are forced to recognize our inadequacy, inability and our own lack of faith as we remain receptive to God's activity.
 - Mk. 9:24 - "I believe; help my unbelief."
 - Jude 1:22 - "have mercy on some who are doubting"
 - (3) God is big enough and understanding enough to accept our doubts, to convince us and assure us of His character and sufficiency, and to bring us along to increased faith.

Seven Families of Doubt

Guinness, Os. *God in the Dark: The Assurance of Faith Beyond a Shadow of Doubt* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1996), 39-161.

1. Doubt from Ingratitude (Forgetting to Remember)

For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Rom 1:21

The first level of understanding necessary to faith is becoming critically aware of our dilemma in life without God. Only when I began to realize what my situation was really like did I see the gospel for what it was—extremely good news for people in extremely bad situations. What happens is that we begin well as Christians as we remember our past clearly. But then time passes, the memory fades and opportunities to doubt begin to come. As we fail to remember our previous situation, a slow and subtle change of heart takes place. What emerges is an attitude of resourcefulness that eventually grows into a mood of self-sufficiency and then into independence (pg. 40-42).

Rebellion against God begins with the self-sufficient heart for whom “thank you” is redundant. This doubt is one of unconcern, lack of urgency, and insensitivity. There is no pain of loss in this doubt, no agonizing uncertainty, no straining desire for a solution. Forgetfulness proves deadly because it strikes deep into the delicate area where conscience registers sin. With this area desensitized, it is only a matter of time before our faith is also numbed. A spiritual movement of independence gathers force underground and come out into the open, using doubt as its prime organ of propaganda (pg. 44-45).

Remedy: *Keep alive a grateful memory* (pg. 51). The theme of remembering, with its twin truth of giving thanks, is inseparable from faith in the Bible (Deut 5:15; 8:2; 6:11-12; Ex 13:3-9; Num 15:38-39; Ps 106:7,13; Neh 9:25-26; Hosea 13:6; 1 Cor 4:7; Luke 7:47; Luke 15:31). The man or woman of faith is the one who remembers, and the one who remembers is the one who give thanks. Unbelief, on the other hand, has a short and ungrateful memory (pg. 45).

2. Doubt from a Faulty View of God (Faith out of Focus)

For some reason or other believers get into their heads such a wrong idea of God that it comes between them and God or between them and their trusting God. Since they do not recognize what they are doing, they blame God rather than their faulty picture, little realizing that God is not like that at all. Unable to see God as he is, they cannot trust him as they should, and doubt is the result (pg. 58-59).

Christian presuppositions are simply Christian truths presupposed. The accuracy of our pictures of God is not tested by our orthodoxy or our testimonies but by the truths we count on in real life. What we presuppose at such moments is our real picture of God, and this may be very different from what we profess to believe about God (pg. 60-61). There are two main ways in which our minds can be affected by faulty presuppositions. The *first* is to allow pre-Christian presuppositions to remain after we have come to faith. Instead of rooting them out and replacing them, we can leave them undisturbed until they are intermingled with the new presuppositions of Christian truth that should be sole foundation of the Christian’s mind. Often this lingering on passes unnoticed because changes in other areas, such as lifestyle, seem so drastic and appear so obvious. The *second* main way in which a Christian’s mind can be affected is by allowing alien presuppositions to enter and dominate afterward. If alien premises are subtle and pervasive, they can filter in and overpower the mind before it is even aware of their presence, let alone their danger (pg. 63-64).

Remedy: Our Christian thinking will make little progress unless its presuppositions are *continually renewed by being brought into line with God’s truth* (pg. 63). We must be careful to *presuppose only what we know to be true* and to commit ourselves consciously to the consequences of these presuppositions. If we conclude other presuppositions are not true, we should root them out (67).

3. Doubt from Weak Foundations (No Reason Why Not)

One of the most common and damaging types of doubt seen in the twentieth-century is this simple but basic deficiency in understanding why the Christian faith is true. Understanding Christians know not only *what* they believe but *why* they believe (with sufficient reasons of which they are fully persuaded). The Christian faith is not true because it works. It works because it is true. No issue is so fundamental both to the searcher and to the believer as the question of truth. The uniqueness and trustworthiness of the Christian faith rest entirely on its claim to be the truth. God, who is the Father of Jesus Christ, is either there or he is not there. Either he has spoken or he has not spoken. What his revelation claims is either true or false. Jesus either rose from the dead or he didn't. There are no two ways about it. This stubborn insistence on truth is one thing that lifts the Christian faith out of the common pool of completely personal, relativistic, subjective beliefs. The Christian faith invites people to an examined faith. Understanding-plus-commitment is the biblical notion of faith. But highest of all, God is truth, so no one who is casual about truth can claim to be a true lover of God or Christ. Passion for truth is a passion for God (pg. 76-78).

Two qualifications: 1) We are not saying that someone who does not understand faith has no faith. Their faith may be undeveloped at the expense of their understanding. 2) We may have sure and sufficient reasons for coming to believe, but we won't always have similar substantiation in every field. We should know where we can understand and where we can't. The rationality of faith goes hand in hand with the mystery of faith. The fact is that the greatest mystery of all—the Incarnation—comes at the very beginning and is the central reason why we believe in God. There are times when we must hold the rationality of faith together with the mystery of faith (pg. 79-80).

This type of doubt strikes at the point where a Christian is strong in faith but weak in faith's foundations. He or she believes all the right things but for no reasons at all or even for the wrong reasons. Faith then runs against an awkward question or a scornful dismissal, and suddenly everything that had seemed so unmistakably certain, meaningful, true collapses like a balloon, leaving the remnants of faith limp and deflated. For many Christians, the world of faith is suspended in uneasy limbo between complete ignorance (which is no longer possible) and sufficient understanding (which is not yet attained). Christians must be saddened by the large numbers of people who claim to have "lost their faith." Many lacked little in terms of orthodoxy or experience but never understood why their faith was true. There are those on the fringes of the church who do not really believe but have no idea why they disbelieve; there are others inside the church who do not really believe but have no idea why they believe (pg. 80-82).

Remedy: 1) *Diagnose* this type of doubt correctly. 2) *Locate* exactly where the weakness in understanding is. 3) *Do the necessary homework* on it to examine the matter to see what the truth of the situation is. Doubt of this kind may well be simple or compound. A compound doubt must be approached with special sensitivity and patience. Out of all the families of doubt, this is probably the one most helped by reading (pg. 88-93).

4. Doubt from Lack of Commitment (An Unsigned Contract)

This type of doubt grows out a deficiency at the threshold of conversion in the place of commitment and conviction in faith. Searchers become believers when they choose and commit themselves to the consequences of their choice. This commitment is not a separate, independent stage but a higher level that builds logically on the implications of the previous levels. Like cement, an understanding commitment transforms mere beliefs into solid convictions.

Conversion may be gradual or sudden, quiet or dramatic, unmistakably evident to others or almost unnoticed. Nonetheless, certain things should be present in an adequate account of conversion, and if we ignore them, we leave openings for later doubts. Christ is the only way to God. The individual's responsibility in conversion is to repent and believe; God's initiative and response are his gift of three things: faith, forgiveness, and the Holy Spirit; and the church's role to welcome the new believer into the fellowship of the community of faith, symbolizing this publicly in the act of baptism. Each of these aspects has its place as a foundation for faith. A

weakness in any of them does not mean that faith is illegitimate but that it is an easy prey for doubt, as later testing may show (pg. 95-97).

The good news of the Christian gospel is a covenant agreement, a contract that God offers to us. The gift of the Holy Spirit is the seal of his part of the covenant; by committing ourselves to him we put our name to it too. It is not enough for us only to see the need of the contract (the essence of level one) or even the attractiveness and reliability of the terms (levels two and three). What is needed to make the contract binding and valid is our signature, a commitment of faith. There is no true knowledge of God without personal conviction, and the idea of a healthy faith that has no personal commitment is a contradiction in terms (pg. 97-98).

Doubt from lack of commitment has nothing whatever to do with the truth or falseness of a belief. The weakness is not in truth as the object of belief; the weakness is in the believer failing to enter into the obligations of believing. The problem is not that believers cannot genuinely believe *something*, but that they will not genuinely believe *anything*. One common doorway to this doubt today is the celebrated “leap of faith” that completely bypasses the question of truth. People believe what they want to believe or need to believe, and that is that. They have no conviction of truth and no corresponding personal conviction in believing (pg. 99).

Two features of today’s world make this element of conviction all the more necessary. First, we face a climate of prevailing *relativism*, the unchallenged assumption of much modern thought. Relativism cuts the ground from under conviction and precipitates a crisis of authority. It sidesteps the basic question “Is it true?” and replaces it with “Does it work?” and “How does it feel?” The effect has been to reduce truth to timeliness, morality to usefulness, and personal faith to what feels good—for me. The second feature is a modern tendency toward *group thinking*. For both good and bad reasons, the emphasis on individuality that has dominated the West since the close of the Middle Ages is now being discouraged in favor of emphasizing the wider group. Choice is one of the root ideas in the word *believe*, and this element of responsibility and commitment is the key to the “obedience of faith” that is the heart of Christian discipleship. A conviction is nothing if it is not our own. No conviction is truly our own unless we are prepared to hold it even if the rest of the world is against it (pg. 101-103).

Remedy: Begin with checking *which stage* the doubt has reached and what is *the root of the lack of conviction*. Only when the cause of doubt has been understood and dealt with can faith be reengaged and personal conviction encouraged. Some need to be reminded of the responsibility that faith requires. Others have problems at a deeper level in a crisis of identity and do not commit themselves to anything. Nothing terrifies them more than the responsibility of choosing. They need to see where the problem lies—with them, not with God. It isn’t that God is unreal; lack of commitment has made everything unreal. What they must do is relearn to choose and commit themselves to the consequences of their choice. As they do this, trusting in God’s help, inching forward like a baby taking its first steps, a sense of reality will return to their faith as well as their lives (pg. 108-112).

5. Doubt from Lack of Growth (No Sign of Life)

This fifth type of doubt is when Christians do not go on, when they do not grow, when they fail to experience and express their new life, when they simply fail to practice the truth. People do not so much lose their faith as cease to use their faith. This doubt is characterized by standing still, by indecision and drift (pg. 114-117).

Remedy: *Put faith to work*. To stretch it, to put it on the line, to prove it in the crucible of experience, and so to let it deepen and grow with the testing of life. The problem is not that faith is untrue but that it is untried. Faith must go on being exercised. Like an athlete in training, faith must keep itself fit. For faith to obey is for faith to come into its own. For faith to practice truth is for faith to be most itself. Obedience is the blood-tie of the new community (pg. 120-123).

6. Doubt from Unruly Emotions (Coup d'Etat from Within)

This type of doubt comes just at the point where the believer's emotions (vivid imagination, changing moods, erratic feelings, intense reactions) rise up and overpower the understanding of faith. Emotional uncertainty has little to do with the content of belief and everything to do with the believer. However firm our understanding in faith and however strong our wills, there is no absolute guarantee against doubt making inroads into faith through our emotions. Exhaustion, loneliness, a long drawn out illness, an accident, bereavement, overwhelming tiredness, a flash of anger of jealousy, or even being undernourished—any of these give the emotions opportunity to usher in doubt (pg. 125-130).

Remedy: 1) The immediate and short-term remedy is to *give the appropriate practical solution*. Beware of being side-tracked. This type of doubt is not important for what it says theologically (however wrong that may be) but for what it shows emotionally. Since the doubt is not a statement so much as a symptom, it is no use correcting what the emotions are saying. The doubter's words should be taken seriously but not literally. For what needs to be changed is what the emotions are showing, the practical root of the problem of which both the emotions and the doubt are only a result. Interestingly, God's remedy for Elijah's depression was not a refresher course in theology but food and sleep (1 Kings 19:5-6). In the long run, the most practical remedy is also the most spiritual. Whatever deals with doubt is the most helpful contribution to faith (pg. 137-139). 2) *Speak truth to yourself* instead of listening to yourself (pg. 140-143).

7. Doubt from Hidden Conflicts (Fear of Pain/Old Wound)

This seventh variety of doubt has psychological origins and is much deeper and more painful than the previous doubt type. This doubt is polite and self-defeating. It is usually rooted in fear of pain from an old wound. Some have an anxiety about God related to past pain. Others suffer from fearfulness and an inability to hand control to God, rooted in a weak sense of self. Still others close themselves off from their feelings by developing an aggressively activist or intellectualist faith. Others again are perfectionists who cannot feel God's love unless they feel they have done something to win it. In each case, past history has become decisive in the way people believe (pg. 145-156).

Remedy: This doubt, like others, must be solved on its own terms. Psychologically-rooted doubts can be resolved in a similar way to emotionally-rooted doubts, for their cause too is subjective. The initial wound was objective and real, of course, yet the doubt is caused, not by the wound itself but by the way it was regarded and the place it was given. The long-term problem is unhealed conflicts and wounds, and these need healing so that faith is able to come into its own (pg. 157-161).