

A Faith Worthy of our Doubt

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West Side Church of Christ
Searcy, Arkansas
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Scripture Reading

“We sometimes tend to think we know all we need to know to answer these kinds of questions—but sometimes our humble hearts can help us more than our proud minds. We never really know enough until we recognize that God alone knows it all.” (1 Corinthians 8:1-3 MSG)

“I believe! Help my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24 NIV)

DOUBTERS WELCOME (IN SCRIPTURE)

For 3 weeks, I’ve tried to press the point that the Christian faith is worthy of our trust. If you sense that there is a moral order greater than any given society; if you think human life is sacred, rights ought to be respected, and that love, beauty, and goodness are real, and deep, and true... If you sense a need for a deeper consolation that “the firm foundation of unyielding despair”... you just might want to give faith in God a try. If you find value in the teachings and example of Christ, if you are moved by the Christian faith of people who changed the world because of it, if you find the resurrection of Jesus something that deserves serious reflection, you just might want to give Christian faith a try.

Philip Yancey calls such people “Believers in the Borderland.”¹ The biblical author Luke has his own phrase for such people. Between “those without God and without hope in the world” and “believers in the community of faith” is a third category: he calls them “God-fearers” (Luke 23:40; Acts 10:2, 22; 13:16, 26).

“I find faith in God interesting and maybe even compelling. But I still have questions. I still have doubts. Is Christianity a faith worthy of my doubts?”

It’s not just believers in the borderlands I’m interested in this morning. There are Christians in the pews. Been there for 20 years. Been teaching Bible class for half that

¹ <https://philipyancey.com/q-and-a-topics/faith-and-doubt>

time. And you wouldn't know it...but I still have questions. I still have doubts. Is Christianity a faith worthy of my doubts?

Doubt is something virtually all of us experience, but we don't always know what to do with it. Our churches don't always know what to do with it. A few years ago, Yancey was asked to sign a “statement of faith” put out by *Christianity Today* magazine, and to sign it “without doubt or equivocation.” He put the pen down and said to the people standing in the room, “I can barely sign my own name without doubt or equivocation.” Can anybody relate? I'm shocked, struck with awe, how many people in the Bible could. There may be people who never have a doubt in their mind about anything involving the Christian faith; I just wonder if they are reading the same Bible I am reading, and if they are experiencing the same faith the Bible characters did. Because I read of Doubting Thomas (who only wanted to experience what all the disciples experienced one week before); skeptical Abraham and laughing Sarah. I even read of a Savior, Jesus Christ, who prays long and hard in the garden asking if there is any other way than the current plan.²

Try this exercise. Find a single major argument against God that you've heard an atheist use that isn't already included in the Bible itself. “Life seems meaningless?” You'll find that in Ecclesiastes. “God can't be good, or loving, or even there if bad things happen to good people.” That's Job. “Evil flourishes and nothing gets done about it.” That's in the Psalms and in Habakkuk. “My soul is crushed; I go looking for comfort from God, and I can't find him.” Read Lamentations.

I remember an episode of the *Andy Griffith* show where Opie tells his father he wants to run away, he just needs permission first. Andy not only gives him permission, he helps him think through all the things he'll need to ensure a clean getaway. Yancey says don't you find it amazing that God not only allows his creatures to deny him, deride him, and defy him, he provides arguments to use against him in the Bible!³

The Bible expresses our doubts. It expresses our waffling. Psalm 22 cries out “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Then just one chapter later, “The Lord is My Shepherd, I shall not want.” But isn't that what a life of faith is like? Doesn't any deep relationship have highs and lows, yet you stick it out?

God doesn't turn his back on questioners; he invites questioners! He honors them. He engages with those whose struggle with faith brings them face to face with difficulties, and they cry out to God about them. “Why did you let this happen?” “How can I

² Philip Yancey, *Reaching for the Invisible God* (Zondervan, 2000).

³ Philip Yancey, “Faith and Doubt,” <https://philipyancey.com/q-and-a-topics/faith-and-doubt>

continue to follow you if you are going to be like this?” “Where were you?” “I don’t believe this.” “I want you to change what you are planning to do.” “That can’t be right. Answer my arguments.” This is in the Bible. Spoken by heroes of faith. And God uses this.

I see it most clearly in story of the hurting father with a dying child who has come to Jesus and has been asked if he believes Jesus has the power to heal. “I believe,” says the father; “help my unbelief.” This may be the greatest 5-word prayer recorded in Scripture. So raw. So transparent. A recognition of one’s own faith struggles, but a desire for one, nonetheless. This is the prayer of many of the people of God. I believe. Help my unbelief.

God can use the passion that goes into struggling and grappling with faith. The opposite of faith is not doubt. God can use doubt. God has used doubt. The opposite of faith is apathy—an unwillingness to engage, an unwillingness to care. What can God do with that?

DOUBTERS UNWELCOME (IN CHURCH)?

The Bible welcomes questions, frustrations, and doubt. The trouble is that sometimes our churches do not.

A recent poll coming out of Great Britain said 4 out of 5 claim the church puts more people off Christianity than attracts them. How could it be possible that church could appear to some as a block rather than a bridge to faith? Well, let me give you some history.

In the year 1633, the religious scholars of the day were convinced that the sun revolves around the earth. They reached this conclusion from a couple of places, but principally from reading their Bibles. I mean, look at Ecclesiastes 1:5 that says the sun rises and the sun sets. If the sun isn’t the thing moving around us, how could Joshua tell the sun to “stand still” (Joshua 10:13)? And if the earth moves, how can the Psalmist say the earth is firm, secure, and immovable (Ps 33:9; 75:3; 93:1; 96:10; 104:5; cf. 1 Chron 16:30)?

But ask any science teacher in this church—ask any science major in your church; in fact, ask any 6th grader, and they will tell you: the earth revolves around the sun. We have several people to thank for that, including Galileo. And once that was firmly established, many went back to the Scriptures and saw things they had never seen there before. Poetic license in the Psalms; accommodative language in Joshua. Metonymy in

Ecclesiastes. Listening to what was going on *outside* Scripture helped us read and appreciate what was going on *in* Scripture.

But it didn't happen overnight, and some good-hearted Bible-reading religious believers made their changes kicking and screaming. Just read the Papal Edict against Galileo from 1633. It charges him for “replying to the objections from the Holy Scriptures...by glossing the...Scriptures according to your own meaning” teaching things that are “expressly contrary to the Holy Scriptures and therefore cannot be defended or held.” He only spent one day in prison but was under house arrest until the day he died 9 years later.⁴

A century before him, Martin Luther was called to his own trial. He dared to challenge the prevailing views he heard both in the world and in the church of his own day. At his trial, the prosecuting attorney said Martin, you are teaching ideas our forefathers already considered and rejected, and now you want us to provide a new, Biblical reason why you are wrong. “But if every one was at liberty to bring back into discussion points which for ages have been settled by the church and by councils, nothing would be certain and fixed...You, for instance, who today reject the authority of the council...tomorrow may, in like manner, proscribe all councils together...and there would remain no authority whatever, but [your] individual word.” Did you hear that? We've already decided what we think about that stuff. To re-examine it again, to look into the Bible with the possibility that our parents were wrong on it and we might find a fresh take on it is dangerous; trust the tradition, and don't ask pesky questions.⁵

THE MYTH OF CERTAINTY

35 years ago, Daniel Taylor (who teaches English at Bethel College in St. Paul, Minnesota) wrote a book with the curious title “the myth of certainty.” His subtitle reads “The Reflective Christian and the Risk of Commitment.” His book is written for the questioner; the doubter; the person always with her hand up in the back of the room. And his message is “the world—and the church—needs you.” Because your willingness to ask tough questions will only make us better and will remind us of the Christian virtue of humility.

I grew up loving what is called “apologetics” or “Christian evidences.” Any time a speaker was coming anywhere near our town, I would do whatever it took to go to the lecture. I bought all the tapes. I got as many books as I could afford. I memorized arguments and was ready to take on everyone at my school, student and teacher alike.

⁴ <http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/galileo/condemnation.html>

⁵ <http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/luther/lutherbyluther.html#secondnarrative>

No one would be spared. I could quote from thick important books I had never read, and ridicule important thinkers I had never studied. I read the cliff notes and knew enough to make my side look great, and their side look silly. The goal wasn't really the search for truth, but the desire to win. And I saw it modeled in the writings and debating tactics of some of the folks I was following.

But not all. Certainly not all. I am still a big fan of Christian apologetics. The field is much wider than I thought at that young age; there are better arguments than I knew at the time, and deeper avenues for conversation than I was even aware of. There is also wide room for disagreement among Christian philosophers on all sorts of things, whereas I thought it was a simple package—as if we had all the truth, it was simple and clear, and anyone with half a brain could see it from reading the quotes I fed them.

You know that narrow-mindedness is not simply on one side of the divide. And in this book, Daniel Taylor reaches out to those of you sickened by over-confidence. Those who say “a pox on both their houses.” Surely the grandeur of the universe, says Taylor, and the greatest minds in the history of the world have left room for us to be less than certain about any number of things. But I want to explore, reason, think, discuss, argue in the best sense of the word, and I want to do it with someone who knows the limits of their own position, someone aware of the strengths of the other side, and who can show me how to live with tensions and uncertainties, rather than sweep everything under the rug like it's a magic show.

I don't know about you, but that resonates with me.

When I was growing up, I ran with a group that idolized “the Bible answer man” vision. That was the goal. To be the Bible answer man. Did you know that, in the Gospels, people came to Jesus with a question 153 times. 147 of those (96% of the time), Jesus responded with another question. Good questions open up discussion. Good questions push us further and deeper into our investigation. Good questions allow both of us to share in the quest.

DOUBTS & QUESTIONS ARE A CRUCIAL PART OF FAITH

And it IS a quest, isn't it? In the New Testament, faith involves three elements: it begins with understanding, then it leads to conviction, and ultimately it leads to commitment. Faith begins with understanding. Faith starts with “thinking.” Do you believe that? Telling people they should believe what the tradition tells you to believe might be just as dangerous. Just because you stand in a certain place doesn't mean you are standing on solid ground! To repeat over and over again what you have always assumed is true—with tenacity and force—can do more harm than good.

Doesn't Hebrews 11:6 show us that thinking leads to faith? Without faith it is impossible to please God; for anyone who comes to God must believe that he exists!

But to seek, to search, to engage in a thinking faith inevitably will bring about new, even disturbing questions. It's the active engagement in faith issues that can produce difficult questions. That is why doubt is not always some big danger to faith, but instead, can actually be a sign of faith. In 2014, Julia Baird wrote an op-ed in the New York Times arguing that very thing.⁶ I mean, you have to believe in something in order to have any doubts about it! Do you see how doubt is a sign of faith?⁷ Doubt and faith can co-exist together, and doubt can often lead to greater faith. Barbara Brown Taylor, that incredible wordsmith, writes “Everyone who saw Jesus saw him after (the resurrection). If it happened in a cave, it happened in complete silence, in absolute darkness. New life starts in the dark. Whether it is a seed in the ground, a baby in the womb, or Jesus in the tomb, it starts in the dark.” The Bible welcomes doubt; it calls for us to seek humility. What it never does it give the impression that Christians have it all figured out. Certainty is actually not one of the virtues or traits of the people of God.

Sometimes churches, well-meaning of course, will want to squash doubt, and remove any hint of dissension. The danger of being a certainty church—saying “don't doubt, just believe”—is that you don't really resolve the doubts. They come back in other ways.

Immanuel Kant said there are 3 questions all educated people have to answer if they want to live a thoughtful, examined life: how can I know what is real? What ought I do to that's right? And what is it that I should be living for? You might assume everyone in here has already answered those questions with “it's in the Bible” so just tell me what's in the Bible. But I promise you, there are people here who have not answered those questions. And unless you can address the needs of your children, your neighbors, and even yourself about why you think the answers to those questions might be found in the Bible you will find a disconnect and Bible answers will fall on deaf ears.⁸

People come to church when they are having a crisis in their life, but that doesn't mean they always come ready to do whatever they are told. And believers—even the ones who say “I'm ready to do whatever the Bible tells me to do” need to know how to major in majors rather than majoring in minors. But there is no preface to Scripture

⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/26/opinion/julia-baird-doubt-as-a-sign-of-faith.html>

⁷ https://www.reasonablefaith.org/media/reasonable-faith-podcast/doubt-and-certainty#_ftn1

⁸ Timothy Keller, “Noah & the Reasons of Faith; Faith As Understanding” (Sep 18, 1994). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ppoMgCIHO3M&ab_channel=GospelinLife

that lays that out. This is why healthy Christian theology is needed; philosophical reflection; careful reasoning; this is what helps us approach Scripture well.

Conversations that only take place within the pages of Scripture—without some reflection on why one should think there is value there—is one reason why we are losing a generation. I told you a few weeks ago “discovered” faith (people brand new to Christianity) is growing through the roof all over the world; but “inherited faith” (baptizing our kids and them becoming church leaders that baptize their kids) is falling and falling fast. C. S. Lewis once wrote an essay where he talked about the difference between dating a virgin and dating a divorcee. The divorcee has heard all the lines, and knows what it feels like for someone to break them, so she has a built-in resistance and maybe even cynicism. Isn’t that the West? People rejecting Christianity because they’ve heard all the lines, but they’ve met Christians. They’ve been hurt by the church.

What I’m saying is this: this series on a “worthy faith” might sound different (with less Bible verses and more outside quotes) because I want you to be able to use these lessons to share with children who no longer have faith, or a sister who is questioning her faith, or a neighbor who told you they have no good reason to even talk to you about faith. But I also think these lessons are needed for you and me. Some of us skipped over those early, fundamental questions, living off the fumes of a Christian family or a Christian culture, and if that’s so, you will learn first-hand how that won’t work in sharing faith with the next generation. It won’t even be enough when you start to have your own questions. Maybe you will never doubt the existence of God or whether Jesus is God’s Son. That truth (capital T) will never be up for debate for you. But “truths” around the center might come up. Somebody gives you a list and says “these are the important questions and the important answers that you have to know to be right with God, or in the right church, or on the right side of history. And you just might ask “who made this list? Why did you pick these topics and not others? Here is an issue Christians disagree about, both sides citing Scripture. In my own tradition, I’ve had teachers who believed Christians can fight in war and those who thought Christians cannot fight in war. Teachers who thought the Spirit dwelled in us personally and those who thought the Spirit dwelled in us representatively. Teachers who thought the death penalty is right, and teachers who thought the death penalty is wrong. Teachers who thought vaccines should be mandated and teachers who thought they should never be mandated. I’m talking about life and death matters, and issues about the nature of God himself. Why are we allowed to disagree about all of these matters, but then we can’t disagree about matters on my list? Citing book, chapter, and verse won’t be enough. Because that’s the very thing we are arguing about—which chapters, and which verses take precedence and priority? How do I know I’m reading this verse right, or giving it its proper place?

Historically, Church has been a place for thinking people to share their curiosity and intellectual doubts, and to hash things out in rigorous debates. Paul devoted two whole chapters of Romans to this question: how do we live together with brothers and sisters who disagree about matters where one side thinks it's a matter of faith, and the other side thinks it's not (Rom 14-15)? And he says “we can do this.” It's why I want to tell people with doubts, concerns, questions—lets have those discussion within the family of faith, rather than seeing those questions as barriers to belonging to the family of faith. But you and I are going to have to see the value in that. We are going to have to re-examine our list of what keeps you out, and me in, or what makes you wrong and me right. But that means questioning, challenging, re-thinking, and listening. It means being open to learning.

FAITH SEEKING UNDERSTANDING

That is why I have always loved the definition of Christian theology given by an 11th century believer by the name of Anselm. He called the Christian life as “faith seeking understanding. The order here is important. I don't have faith because I figured everything out; I am able to make sense of things because I start with faith. I don't fear learning (as if learning, questioning, reading, hearing new ideas outside my usual circle will hurt my faith). It is because of my faith that I eagerly seek to learn, explore, and grow.

The phrase “faith seeking understanding” is beautiful but it also is challenging. It takes faith seriously, but it takes understanding with equal seriousness. We are called to be child-like, but not child-ish. An unquestioning, unchallenging, non-reflective faith is the opposite of healthy, it would be faith rejecting understanding. The phrase “faith seeking understanding” makes an ethical demand upon us as well. It requires the virtue of intellectual honesty. We are believers in God seeking to more fully understand God. When we read, when we think, when we study, when we listen to new ideas, we aren't seeking “ammunition” or more “planks” upon which to express or argue our deeply-held beliefs. That would be “faith seeking the opportunity to win.” This approach would look for some book, some person, some website, or some reference source that gives support for an idea we have, and then looks no further (out of fear), having found what we were looking for. No, faith seeking understanding wants to know what is true. We welcome challenges to our assumptions; if someone shows us something that is more true, more right, it makes us better. That's faith seeking understanding. Discipleship is a call to virtue, and that must apply to an open mind and a desire to be corrected; after all, the ability to be corrected is the mark of a truly wise and truly spiritual person.

Church is not a place for certainty, but confidence. Confidence in the One who has called us. Confidence in God as the source of all truth. Confidence in Jesus as the giver of all truth. Confidence in the Spirit as the one who leads us into all truth.

Let our attitude toward seekers who come through our doors, and our attitude toward one another model the words of the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 8:1-3. But hear it in an unfamiliar translation so it might hit you differently than before:

“We sometimes tend to think we know all we need to know to answer these kinds of questions— but sometimes our humble hearts can help us more than our proud minds. We never really know enough until we recognize that God alone knows it all.” (1 Corinthians 8:1-3 MSG)