

youthESource Bible Study

Is it Okay to Doubt?

by Tim Bayer

An Opening Thought

Youth Leader,

Perhaps this might be a skewed question. Often we think “is something okay” to either relieve us from our guilt or to back ourselves (or someone else) into a corner so as to convince them of something they may not yet hold to and believe. A better question to consider might be, “What does God think about my doubts?”

The way we understand doubt makes a difference. Understand that doubt is not necessarily unbelief. Belief (faith) is a work of the Holy Spirit, alone. Doubt is completely different. Doubt may be understood as “not understanding” or “it seems farfetched”. Unresolved doubts may or may not lead to unbelief; however, doubt in and of itself is not unbelief (non faith).

May the Holy Spirit give you guidance as you discuss your students' and their families' doubts about God, themselves and the life God gives us.

Quote

“Doubt is not the opposite of faith; it is one element of faith.” – Paul Tillich

What is your reaction to Paul Tillich's quote?

Read John 20:24-31.

Illustrations/Stories about Doubt

A trial lawyer was defending a man charged with murder. There was strong evidence pointing to guilt but there was no corpse, no body. Knowing that it was his job to hold off a jury decision of “guilty,” the defense attorney resorted to using a trick in his closing argument. He stood, looking as confident as he could, and said, “Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, I have a surprise for you. Within one minute, the person presumed dead in this case will walk into this courtroom.” The lawyer then turned and looked at the courtroom door. The jurors were stunned and all looked eagerly toward the door. A full minute passed and nothing happened. Finally the lawyer said, “Ladies and gentlemen, I apologize to you for making a false statement. However, every one of you looked on with anticipation as you awaited the arrival of the person presumed dead in these proceedings. Therefore, I must ask you to deliver a verdict of 'not guilty' because there was reasonable doubt in every juror's mind as they looked at the courtroom door. The reasonable doubt is that anyone was actually murdered.” He then sat down. The jury, now clearly confused, retired to deliberate. Within a half an hour, the jury returned to the courtroom and delivered a verdict of guilty. The defense attorney was stunned! He couldn't believe his ears. He stood up and asked, “How in the world could you find this man guilty? Everyone of you looked at the door and waited for the man presumed dead to walk into this very courtroom.” The foreman of the jury said, “Oh, yes, every one of us looked. But your client didn't!”

An old joke once implies that there are three kinds of people in this world: those who can count and those who can't. But thinking about this subject of doubt, there probably are three kinds of people. First would be those people who have doubted. The second group would be those people who haven't doubted yet but who will. The third group would be those who are brain dead. If you take seriously your faith, it's just a matter of time

before you come to some issue, have some questions, some hesitations, some uncertainties or some doubts over one thing or another. This isn't just a Christian experience; this is a human experience.

Myths That We Discover About Doubt in John 20:24-31

1. **Doubt is the opposite of faith.** No it's not. This is a common misconception. We have to ask the question, is Thomas a disciple (a follower and learner of Jesus)? History reflects a resounding yes. Verse 24 refers to him as "one of the Twelve". There's a big difference between unbelief and doubt. **Unbelief** is a willful refusal to believe. It's a deliberate decision to deny God, to not have faith. But that's not what doubt is. The dictionary defines **doubt** as a feeling of uncertainty. All of the New Testament words for doubt have this sense of *double-ness*. So also do many other languages. The Chinese speak of a person with "a foot in two boats" and the Navajo of "that which is two with a person." An all-important difference exists, therefore, between the open-minded uncertainty of doubt and the closed-minded certainty of unbelief. Be sure to know that faith is crucial and doubts are serious. But *because doubt is not unbelief it is not terminal*. Followers of Christ are realistically committed to truth, people who "think in believing and believe in thinking" as Saint Augustine expressed it.
2. **Doubt is unforgivable.** The best Christians in the world have had serious doubts. For instance, Moses certainly doubted that God could use him to lead His people out of Egypt. Elijah doubted that God would really protect him from evil Jezebel. Gideon did not know whether God would live up to his promise. John the Baptist questioned whether Jesus was the Messiah after all. Did Jesus condemn him for it? No. Jesus said of John, "Of men born of a woman, there is no man greater than John." Didn't John doubt who you were, Jesus? And what about the disciples? Thomas in this account clearly doubts in verse 25, "Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe." It's a statement of doubt. Clearly these people doubted God at a specific point in time as the Scriptures testify. Were all these people forgiven? Yes.

Even when Jesus gives the Great Commission in Matthew 28:17-20, "some doubted".

Luke 24:10-12 implies that doubt is being hesitant. Do you think that Peter was a little hesitant in this passage?

How do doubting people move from skepticism to forgiveness? By seeing God and receiving the Holy Spirit that holds fast to the promises of faith. John 1 says, "the Word became flesh and dwelled among us and we have seen His glory..."

If you struggle with doubts about God, ask yourself, where have you seen God in His body (the church), active in His Word, "in your face" through the Sacraments? Doubts are always challenged by the Holy Spirit through that which is tangible and seen – the given gifts of God.

3. **Doubt is unhealthy.** Doubts arise, and we struggle with God. Usually this is a result of a crisis or traumatic event. Sometimes it's a result of a broken home. Ultimately, the root of doubt is the sin that fragments our human understanding of God and our relationship with the Creator as He created. The good news is that with God's help, our doubt can grow us into mature, healthy, well grounded followers of Jesus Christ. Tasting a bit of doubt can deepen your faith. It can give you a hardier, more enduring, more resilient faith. Gary Parker said in the book *The Gift of Faith*, "If faith never encounters doubt, if truth never struggles with error, if good never battles with evil, how can faith know it's own power? In my own pilgrimage, if I have to choose between a faith that has stared doubt in the eye and made it blink, or a naive faith that has never known the fire line of faith, I will choose the former every time."

Thomas' doubt strengthened his faith as Jesus came to him and challenged his doubt, and Thomas responded through the power of the Holy Spirit, "My Lord and my God!" (verse 28). Of course, we know that statement of faith is powered by the Holy Spirit because the Apostle Paul says, "So I want you to know that no one speaking by the Spirit of God will curse Jesus, and no one can say Jesus is Lord, except by the Holy Spirit" (1 Corinthians 12:3).

Unchecked Doubt

Author and Apologist Lee Strobel reminds us that doubt, if unchecked, can do great damage to our faith. It's like a virus that can spread and infect us and do great damage. Why? Because doubt can gain a foothold in our minds. Often intellectual doubts come through our mind. A few years ago, Bill O'Reilly gave his opinion of the biblical gospels. He went on to say that the gospels aren't history, they are just lessons. "If I want history, I will go to a historian like Josephus of Jesus' day, or Tacitus - but not the Gospels. They aren't history." Then he went on to say, "I know some Christians believe there was really a garden and the apple and the whole thing, and there was a real Noah and the flood and I won't tell those who believe these things they are idiots because they have the right to believe what they want..."

If you watch the Discovery Channel or the History channel too long, you're going to start wondering if what they are saying is really true. As you prepare to go to university, your faith *will* be challenged. Seemingly simple classes can easily create doubtful thoughts in your mind like: "Maybe this Bible is just a bunch of myths, wishful thinking. Am I stupid for believing this?" If we don't know what our faith clings to (or, *who* our faith clings to), if we don't really know who God is, about His love, mercy, reliability, we can let doubt trick us into believing the lie.

Carl Sagan, the famous scientist and astronomer, was a convinced agnostic. He couldn't believe that rational adults could cling to a faith based on the unverifiable testimony of observers who had been dead for 2,000 years. Once he challenged Joan Brown Campbell, an ordained pastor, "You're so smart; why do you believe in God?" To which she replied, "You're so smart; why don't you believe in God?" Carl Sagan never came to believe in God. His wife reported after his death that there was no deathbed conversion, no hope for an afterlife and no hope that the two of them would ever be reunited. Someone asked her if Dr. Sagan ever wanted to believe. She replied fiercely, "Carl never wanted to believe. He wanted to know."

What Carl Sagan should have known was that we can't know everything. We're not that smart! Doubt assumes that given enough time and information, we can know everything. It just isn't so. But where knowledge ends, faith begins. Where knowledge falls in despair, faith stands in triumph!

We have all been there with Thomas. I want more proof. I want to touch Jesus, myself. Virtually every major figure in Christian history has gone through periods of doubting his or her faith and call. Saint Augustine, Martin Luther, John Wesley - each of them walked through the valley of doubt and despair. Even Mother Teresa, one of the most prominent and saintly Christians of our own age, had moments when she felt abandoned by God.

Jesus reminds us, "Blessed are those who believe and do not doubt." But God is willing and ready for us to dialogue with Him and the truths He shares with us. Is it okay to doubt (and still believe)? Of course you can! **But God doesn't intend for you to stay in your doubt or unbelief.** He wants to lead you to a greater understanding of His love, His grace and who you have been created and redeemed to be in Jesus.

Questions to Consider

1. What is really at the root of your doubt? Is your doubt really a smokescreen to keep God at arm's length and not really deal with the pride that is in your life? What's at the root of the doubt?
2. Are you willing to ask God and others for help? Can you be honest with God? Remember the story in the Bible about the father who came to Jesus pleading for help. He said to Jesus: "I do believe. Help my unbelief." Are you willing to pray that prayer? Jesus responded and healed his son.
3. Are you serious about searching for answers to your questions? Will you take time to read God's Word on a regular basis in order for God to begin speaking to you? The International Bible Society tells us that 87% of Christians do not read the Bible every day. It's no surprise we begin believing lies. Are you willing to be like Thomas, to at least check out Jesus and the truths of Christ for yourself?

4. Are you willing to be patient with your questions? Someone has written that it's as if God lets us love the question until we can live the answer. In many ways, I have discovered that to be true in my own life. My own doubts forced me to continue to search and study and pray until I felt like my question was answered and I was able to live and believe differently as a result.

Could it be that God is looking for honest doubters, people who are truly searching for truth, for God's presence in His Word and Sacrament through His Church (you and me!). With the help of the Holy Spirit, we can confess with Job, a man who went through such great trials and testing, with many doubts to be sure, but a man who was able to confess, "I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes - I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me" (Job 19:25-27)!

More **Questions to Consider**

What is the role of "doubt" in your life?

How is doubt a good thing?

Is there a point at which doubt begins not to be a good thing anymore? Is there a "line" it can cross?

Can doubt lead to a paralyzing of one's faith?

Some Thoughts from Contemporary Blogger/Columnist Rachel Held Evans (www.rachelheldevans.com)

- "We've never been taught to doubt well."
- "I believe that doubt is part of a vibrant, growing faith."
- "I believe that doubt is necessary as it helps us identify those parts of our faith which are dying and/or dead."
- "I believe doubt can lead us to embracing the mysteries of faith."

Apophatic Theology

Apophatic theology, also known as Negative Theology or Via Negative is a theology that attempts to describe God, the Divine Good, by negation, to speak only in terms of what may not be said about the perfect goodness that is God. It stands in contrast with Cataphatic theology. In brief, negative theology is an attempt to achieve unity with the Divine Good through discernment, gaining knowledge of God of what God is not (apophasis), rather than describing what and who God is.

A Closing Thought

We must ask, how do we best (humanly) process doubt? No doubt (no pun intended), it is through human relationship, conversation and establishing a "secure attached relationship" with God (by faith) and with each other through the human experience (First Article realities). Often times, our doubts arise out of an insecure relationship with God (I'm not sure if He's always there for me) which is nurtured through the human First Article experiences with parents, siblings, family, friends, co-workers, teachers, etc. Encourage your students' parents to discuss doubts as a family. It will not only bring the family together and strengthen their earthly relationship, it will strengthen their faith relationship, together! And you, Youth Leader, have been blessed to facilitate the work of God and witness His Holy Spirit at work!

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