

in the hospital, missed days of school, and the list goes on. I remarked then and have continued to tell people since that he has shown great resilience and quiet and calm confidence. He trusts God, and he trusts his doctors. Early on, as people expressed grave concern and worry about him, he said to me. "I won't worry unless my doctors are worried. I trust most those who know the most." His faith is sure, but not simplistic. He grieves the losses to his childhood, and in lament he has wondered what might have been—"I wish it had been mono." Through it all he has displayed patience, hopefulness, and trust. I need to honor the way he has approached his disease and treatment, and learn from him even as I seek to support and encourage him.

I write these things not to highlight the strength and faith of my son (or myself and my family) as if it is uncommon. I know many people in difficult situations who bear faithful witness to the grace of God. I write these things as a testimony to the light of Christ in the midst of darkness.

On the occasions when I pray the compline prayer before going to sleep, I pray for my son and those close to me. I also pray for people unknown to me. I am grateful that God, whose love is steadfast and grace is sure, receives my prayers. I have come to see today that the first words I spoke to my wife that March night—"Remember, we are not alone"—were a gift of God's grace. And I give humble thanks to God for welcoming the prayers of those who unknowingly prayed for me that night.

Keep watch, dear Lord, with those who work, or watch, or weep this night, and give your angels charge over those who sleep. Tend the sick, Lord Christ; give rest to the weary, bless the dying, soothe the suffering, pity the afflicted, shield the joyous; and all for your love's sake. Amen.  
(Book of Common Prayer, "Order for Compline")

## Chapter Nine

# Doubt

KEITH L. JOHNSON

A STUDENT RECENTLY VISITED MY OFFICE to discuss some concerns she was having about her Christian faith. As we talked, it became clear that she had several important questions about God and salvation that she could not answer with confidence. Although she desired to have faith in Christ, she did not feel sure about what she believed. She worried that her doubt was a sign of sinful rebellion against God, but she simply could not resolve it on her own.

Our discussion reminded me of the story of the father who sought out Jesus in Mark 9:14-29. The story is dramatic because the father needed a miracle. His son had a spiritual affliction that often left him on the ground, seized up, and foaming at the mouth. The terror could strike at any moment. Once, his son had been standing next to the fire and then fell into it, causing terrible scars. Another time he was cast into the water and nearly drowned. The father worried about his son constantly, and he rarely let him stray from his sight. No doctor had been able to help. Maybe Jesus could do something.

He brought his son out to meet Jesus, but when they arrived they found only a few of his disciples because Jesus had gone to a nearby mountain. But the father thought that perhaps these disciples could help. At the father's request, they tried to cast out the evil spirit. They failed just like everyone else. Then the situation started to grow chaotic. Some scribes began arguing with the disciples about the technicalities of the Jewish law. A crowd began to gather, with voices rising and

elbows jostling. The father became anxious, and his son became agitated. The father likely began to worry that this journey to Jesus had been a mistake.

Then suddenly a shout arose from the crowd, "Jesus is coming!" The man's heart must have leaped into his throat as the people parted to let Jesus through. "What are you arguing about with them?" Jesus asked his disciples.

With courage born of desperation, the father spoke up. "Teacher, I brought you my son; he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak; and whenever it seizes him, it dashes him down; and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid; and I asked your disciples to cast it out, but they could not do so."<sup>1</sup>

Jesus looked at the boy, and then he looked at his disciples and the agitated crowd. "You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him to me." The man led his son forward to meet Jesus, but at that precise moment the spirit who possessed him stuck the boy down. He fell to the ground and began to roll in the dirt. The father tried to hold him to keep him from harm.

"How long has this been happening to him?" Jesus asked. The father told him it had been taking place since childhood. And then, clutching his son in his arms, he added: "But if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us."

As I imagine the story, I suspect that Jesus probably let out a sound that seemed close to a chuckle. "If you are able!—All things can be done for the one who believes."

Immediately the father cried out, "I believe; help my unbelief!" The words probably came out before the father could think about them, but they reflected his heart. He did believe, or at least he *hoped* to believe. Why else would he have come to Jesus? But of course he also had doubts. No one had been able to help his son. Why would Jesus be any different? He did not want to get his hopes up. And who was this Jesus anyway? Where did he come from? The father had so many questions,

and they kept him from being certain. Yet his son needed a miracle, and he was willing to trust this man Jesus in the midst of his doubts.

The crowd began to tighten around them. Then Jesus said, "You spirit that keeps this boy from speaking and hearing, I command you, come out of him, and never enter him again!" The boy cried out, convulsed, and then grew still. "Is he dead?" people in the crowd asked in whispers. But Jesus took the boy's hand and lifted him up until he stood. He was healed.

As I read and discussed this story from Mark 9 to my student, it showed her that she was not alone in her doubts. In fact, the father stands in the place of every believer, because the entire Christian life occurs within the dynamic of faith and doubt. Christians have faith in Jesus Christ—that is what makes them Christian. But they also are called to *understand* the things they say they believe. To this end the church traditionally has drawn a distinction between faith and fideism, which is the "reliance upon faith alone, accompanied by a consequence disparagement of reason."<sup>2</sup> But applying the standard of reason to the claims of the faith sometimes means that questions are raised for which answers are not immediately available. There are limits to human knowledge, because "we walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Cor 5:7) and "see in a mirror, dimly" (1 Cor 13:12). These unanswered questions leave room for doubt to arise. Do the claims of faith make sense? Are they really true? How can anyone ever be sure?

I told my student that doubt is not the opposite of faith. Doubt often is simply the form faith takes as Christians venture beyond the limits of their comprehension. It is not necessarily a sign of disobedience. Rather, doubt often results directly from a believer's obedience to the command to "take every thought captive" to Christ (2 Cor 10:5). This does not mean that doubt should be taken lightly or embraced. Christians always should be moving from doubt toward confidence. But that journey can be long and difficult, perhaps even lasting a lifetime. And it is a journey that requires help from Christ. The father's words belong to every Christian: "I believe; help my unbelief!"

## WHAT IS DOUBT?

Several different Greek words are translated into English Bibles as “doubt.” The first is *distazō*, which means “to hesitate.” Jesus uses this word when Peter begins to sink while walking on the water. Even though Peter was brave enough to get out of the boat, the strong winds and waves made him hesitate in fear. Jesus responds by immediately pulling Peter out the water. “You of little faith,” he said, “why did you doubt?” (Mt 14:31). Later, Matthew uses the same word to describe the disciples after Christ’s resurrection. As they gather on the mountain to receive the Great Commission from Jesus, something inside of them causes them to hold back from a full commitment: “they worshiped him; but some doubted” (Mt 28:17).

Luke uses the Greek word *dialogizomai* in a similar way to describe the disciples’ doubt after Jesus’ resurrection. This verb is related to the English word for dialogue, and it is used to describe an internal conflict that arises as an argument is considered from multiple angles. Again, the term communicates hesitation and inaction. The risen Jesus applies it to his disciples after they are struck with terror and think they might be seeing a ghost. “Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?” (Lk 24:38).

A different word shows up when Jesus instructs his disciples about the importance of faith. After causing the fruitless fig tree to wither at his command, Jesus tells the disciples that they will be able to perform similar miracles if they “have faith and do not doubt” (Mt 21:21). The Greek word here is *diakrinō*, which means “to be at odds with.” The same root is used to talk about the separation of one thing from another. It depicts people who are indecisive because they are internally divided and unable to make up their minds. James uses this word while describing how believers should present their requests to God. “Ask in faith,” he says, “never doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind; for the doubter, being double-minded and unstable in every way, must not expect to receive anything from the Lord” (Jas 1:6-7). Later in his letter James uses another word for “double-minded,” the Greek word *dipsychos*. This word depicts

someone who lives in such internal tension that they cannot move forward with confidence.

Taken together, these terms provide a picture of what a doubter looks like according to the Bible. Doubt is not equivalent to unbelief or a lack of faith. Rather, a doubter possesses faith but hesitates to act on it. Something causes them to hold themselves back from God. They are indecisive because their minds are divided. Questions have arisen that they do not know how to resolve. As they consider the possibilities, they exist in a state of suspended animation, unable to move toward Jesus but not rejecting him either. They believe in Christ but lack confidence in this belief. They are at odds with themselves, and so when they hear Christ’s call to follow, they remain stuck in place.

## ARE THERE DIFFERENT KINDS OF DOUBT?

Some doubts are intellectual and others are relational. It is important to distinguish between these different kinds of doubt and their causes.

Intellectual doubt tends to arise as Christians seek to understand what they believe. The desire to understand one’s faith is an act of obedience because Jesus instructed his followers to love God with their minds as well as their heart, soul, and strength (Mt 22:37). Part of loving God with one’s mind is understanding the content of one’s faith. To this end Paul prayed that believers would have “the riches of assured understanding” that should come with faith in Christ (Col 2:2). Yet seeking to understand one’s faith requires courage because it requires believers to examine and test what they believe. This process can prompt new and difficult questions.

To illustrate the challenge involved, think of a mechanic who wants to understand the inner workings of a car. To gain this understanding, he will need to do more than simply look at the engine. He will have to take the engine apart, examine each part closely, understand how they relate to one another, and then put the engine back together. The entire process of disassembling and reassembling the car will provide the mechanic with a deeper and more accurate understanding of its operation. Christians who seek to understand their faith work in much the same

way. To know what they believe, they have to examine the various claims they affirm, understand their implications, and discern how they relate. The problem is that this process often raises new and difficult questions that a believer cannot immediately answer. Think again about the mechanic. He might disassemble an engine only to realize that he does not know what a particular part does or how it works in relation to the others. "I wonder what this thing is for," he says. As he goes about his work, the mechanic might receive conflicting information from the people around him. "In my model of car, that part goes here," one person might say. But another person might respond, "No, that part fits over here." The mechanic eventually may realize that he does not know how to put the engine back together. At some point, doubt arises: "Will I ever be able to make this car run again?"

Christians often end up in a similar position. As they seek to understand their faith, problems arise that they may have never considered before. Or perhaps they are exposed to challenges raised by the questions of others. Out of the desire to give an accounting for what they believe (1 Pet 3:15), they might examine their faith only to realize that they do not have a good account to offer. Along the way, they might receive conflicting advice about how the various doctrines of the faith hold together. Doubt can show up in any of these scenarios as the Christian either begins to lack confidence in the claims of the faith or in their ability to understand them.

Intellectual doubts also can arise because a believer has other convictions that stand in tension with their faith. For example, a person might say, "I doubt that Jesus Christ rose from the dead" because she is certain that dead people cannot rise from the grave. Or she might say, "I cannot believe that God is good" because she is convinced that God has directly caused her to suffer. In these cases resolving the doubt involves examining the competing claims, assessing their accuracy, and then either abandoning or revising one or more of the claims. Other doubts stem from the lack of firm conviction. This kind of doubt often arises from a perceived absence of evidence for Christian claims. A person might say, "There is no proof that Jesus Christ rose

from the dead." Or they might say, "I have no basis from which I can say that God is good." Resolving these doubts requires assembling enough evidence to help the believer assent to the claims of the faith. In these cases the challenge often centers on the criteria used to weigh the evidence. A person who doubts the claims of the Christian faith usually presupposes an undoubted set of criteria by which their faith should be assessed. He might say, "I will not believe that Jesus rose from the dead until I can prove it historically." This argument presupposes that resurrections are the kind of thing that can be verified through historical investigation. But is this criterion itself valid? This means that in addition to assembling enough evidence to warrant assent, the believer also has to examine the way the judgment is being made.<sup>3</sup>

Along with intellectual doubt, many Christians fall into relational doubt. This kind of doubt stems from a lack of confidence in God's character or the sense that God cannot be trusted. Such feelings often show up after an experience of harm or suffering. "If God is really good, then why has God allowed this evil to occur?" Christians also can experience relational doubt in more subtle ways. As they go about their daily lives, Christians sometimes begin to wonder if their faith in God makes any difference. Or perhaps they look at their flawed lives and wonder if they can ever measure up to who God calls them to be. Martin Luther talked about this kind of doubt as a form of spiritual tribulation marked by the internal conflict between the human conscience and the gospel of Christ.<sup>4</sup> As believers recognize the depth of their sin, they sometimes doubt that God really loves them or can use them in ministry. They may start to view Christ as a harsh judge instead of a merciful Savior, and they doubt whether Christ's promises of grace and mercy can be believed.

John Calvin argued that this kind of thinking has its roots in the contradiction between the way Scripture presents Christ and the believer's experience of the Christian life. Questions arise because Christian's "circumstances are all in opposition to the promises of God. He promises us immortality; yet we are surrounded by mortality and

corruption. He declares that he accounts us just; yet we are covered with sins.”<sup>5</sup> Doubt often fills the gap between a believer’s expectations of the Christian life and its reality, and this doubt is rooted in questions about God’s character. The church often exacerbates rather than mitigates this kind of doubt because Christians regularly fail to live up to their calling. While examples of faithful believers abound, the history of the church also is full of unfaithful Christians who foster division, commit sinful deeds, and turn people away from Christ. All of these realities feed the presence of doubt. A believer might ask, “If the church does not measure up to God’s promises, and if my life does not measure up either, then does God really keep his word?”

### IS IT SINFUL FOR A CHRISTIAN TO DOUBT?

The Bible does not encourage believers to embrace doubt, but it does not always condemn doubt as sinful. Instead, doubt is depicted as a product of the frailty that comes with being a finite and fallen human being.

Those who argue that doubt is always sinful tend to assume that the claims of the Christian faith must be held with absolute certainty. They insist that doubt is a sign of unfaithfulness, a distrustful act of turning away from God. But this approach stems from a distorted notion of faith. Christians traditionally have not required absolute certainty on every point of doctrine because such certainty is categorically impossible for finite creatures. After all, humans are not God, and they do not know God as God knows himself. God knows himself directly and immediately, but humans know God indirectly through the mediation of the created realities God uses in his self-revelation.<sup>6</sup> The knowledge of God humans have through faith is real and true, but it is merely creaturely knowledge. Even as humans know God through created things, God’s divine nature remains invisible to direct human perception (Rom 1:20). This explains why human knowledge of God is by faith rather than sight (2 Cor 5:7). Believers will not see God directly until their final redemption when they will see God “as he is” (1 Jn 3:2). As Paul puts it, “For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see

face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully” (1 Cor 13:12). Until this fuller knowledge occurs, many things of God will remain beyond human comprehension.

The fact that life with God involves an ongoing encounter with mystery explains why Hebrews defines faith as “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Heb 11:1). Having an assurance of something or holding a conviction about it is different from possessing an absolute rational certainty. Christians can be certain about what they believe, but they must remember that this is the certainty of *faith*. Faith involves trust in the promises and character of the God whose divine being transcends all creaturely capacities and thus has not yet been seen directly. Again, as Paul puts it, “O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!” (Rom 11:33-34).

### BUT WHAT ABOUT THE WARNING GIVEN IN JAMES?

James issues strong remarks about doubt at the beginning of his letter:

If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given to you. But ask in faith, never doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind; for the doubter, being double-minded and unstable in every way, must not expect to receive anything from the Lord. (Jas 1:5-8)

The key to interpreting these remarks is to understand that James’s primary purpose in this passage is to point to God’s generosity. He is saying that because God does not hold back from helping his people, no one should hold themselves back from God. A person in need should ask God for help with confidence that they will receive this help. A doubter in this instance is someone who does not ask God for help because they assume God will not give it. James’s point is that a person who does not ask for help will not receive it.

These insights about God’s generosity provide context for James’s comments on doubt. His goal is not to condemn all doubters everywhere.

Rather, he wants to encourage people to present their needs to God—including their need to overcome doubt. If someone lacks knowledge about something, they should ask God for help. This is good news because every Christian will be in this position at some point when it comes to their understanding of the faith.

### **DID THOMAS SIN WHEN HE DOUBTED THE RESURRECTION?**

The passage about Thomas's doubt occurs at the end of the Gospel of John, and it has to be interpreted in light of the purpose for which John wrote it. The story begins after the resurrection, when the risen Jesus meets his disciples by appearing to them in the midst of a locked room. He shows them his pierced hands and side and then gives them the Spirit as he had promised (Jn 20:19-23). Thomas was not present for this initial meeting. After hearing the disciples' report, he wanted more evidence. "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe" (Jn 20:25). A week later, Jesus once again appears in the middle of the room. Thomas is present this time, and Jesus says to him: "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe" (Jn 20:27).

The key to interpreting this passage is to watch how Jesus relates to Thomas. Jesus does not condemn Thomas for his doubt or scold him for wanting more evidence. Instead, Jesus simply presents his wounds to Thomas and calls him to believe. And Thomas immediately responds with faith: "My Lord and my God!" (Jn 20:28). The way Jesus approaches Thomas—and the way Thomas responds to Jesus—reveals John's purpose for the passage. John's goal is not to portray Thomas as a sinful doubter whose example is to be avoided at all costs. Rather, John presents Thomas as a *role model* for Christians. The reader is called to come to faith in Jesus in the same way that Thomas came to faith in Jesus. Indeed, this is precisely how Jesus himself sees Thomas: "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe" (Jn 20:29). The

point is that John's readers should follow Thomas's example by also believing in Jesus.

It is never wrong to seek evidence about the things of God. In fact, the Bible praises people who desire evidence, just as the Jews in Berea are praised for responding to the gospel by searching the Scriptures "to see whether these things were so" (Acts 17:11). Seeking further knowledge about God—even if this search raises difficult questions—is precisely what someone who has faith in Jesus should do.

### **CAN DOUBT LEAD TO SIN?**

Doubt crosses into sin when a person stops trying to address it. Thomas doubted the resurrection, but he did not sin as he did so. His doubt arose because of his limited knowledge and his inability to make sense of what he heard. He had sincere questions that prevented him from affirming that Christ was alive, and he wanted more information to answer these questions. This is the key: Thomas sought to address the causes of his doubt. He was willing to learn, and he embraced the truth immediately after Jesus appeared to him. Pilate was different. When he met Jesus, he doubted the truth of Jesus' words but did not seek further information. His question "What is truth?" was more of a statement than an inquiry (Jn 18:38). Pilate embraced doubt as an ongoing posture of life, and this posture enabled him to defer responsibility for making a decision about Jesus. His example serves as a warning: doubt that becomes an end in itself strays into sin.

A helpful way to assess doubt is to ask about its trajectory. Where is one's doubt leading to? Is the person with doubt seeking answers to their questions? Are they willing to listen to other people and learn new information? Or have they embraced doubt as a permanent state of being? Are they using the presence of doubt to defer making a judgment or to justify certain beliefs and behaviors? Is the mind of the doubter open or closed? A posture of doubt often is viewed as a mark of open-mindedness. Instead of embracing the unreflective faith of the simple, doubters are seen as intelligent, authentic, and even heroic. As Charles Taylor observes, they often view their willingness to doubt as

an act of liberation from the “earlier, confining horizons, or illusions, or limitations of knowledge.”<sup>7</sup> But this static posture of doubt can be as closed-minded as any other belief.

The Pharisees display this kind of closed-mindedness during their encounters with Jesus. To be fair, both their prior experience and their theological commitments legitimately prompted them to doubt that Jesus was the Messiah. Many others before Jesus had falsely claimed the title of Messiah, and Jesus did not fit their expectation for how the promised Messiah would live and act. But instead of seeking information and listening to Jesus with an open mind, they decided in advance that he was a false teacher. Because they were confident that they possessed the truth, they approached Jesus with arrogance instead of humility. They asked Jesus questions, but these questions were designed to embarrass and entrap him rather than learn from him (Mt 22:15). These activities stand in stark contrast to a faithful and open-minded approach to doubt. Having an open mind does not require a person to place their doubt aside, avoid asking questions, or stop thinking for themselves. But it does require a willingness to listen, learn new things, and change one’s mind when necessary.

Doubt also strays into sin when it becomes an obsession. A Christian might be so focused on their doubts that they spend all of their time thinking about themselves rather than God. Instead of focusing on God’s promises, they concentrate on their uncertainties and remain unable to move forward in their faith. The mirror image of this problem occurs when the doubter becomes indifferent or apathetic about God and their faith. The extreme form of this is agnosticism, which is a suspension of belief in God that endures permanently. More often, a person might believe in God but question whether God cares about them or makes a difference within the world. They might affirm key doctrines but wonder if these commitments actually matter. Often this mindset is based on a perceived lack of closeness to God or a person’s sense that they do not feel God’s presence in their lives. Doubt of this sort often leads to the sin of sloth because it can be used to justify not seeking to grow in the faith. Questions remain unaddressed, problems

stay unsolved, and a person shows no concern to move beyond their present state. Doubt also can manifest itself in more subtle ways. For example, a believer might be confident in their convictions but live in a manner that betrays these convictions. This kind of doubt shows up whenever a Christian believes in God but makes decisions as if God is not really a factor.

Doubt also moves into sin when it becomes unbelief. To be clear: a person who doubts does not fall simply into unbelief, and unbelief cannot occur by accident due to a misunderstanding. Rather, unbelief reflects an intentional decision to reject God. Some people reject God on moral grounds in response to the existence of evil and suffering. Others simply deny God’s existence and embrace atheism. In these cases, doubt has turned into a sinful certainty that marks a willful turning away from God.

### **CAN GOD USE DOUBT FOR GOOD?**

Doubt should not be excluded from Paul’s claim that “all things work together for good for those who love God” (Rom 8:28). There are at least three ways that God can produce good out of the experience of doubt.

First, God can use doubt to propel Christians into a deeper understanding of their faith. Doubt often arises because Christians find that their prior beliefs no longer make sense. This discovery can happen suddenly or gradually over time. An experience of suffering might prompt hard questions about God’s character. A person might enter a new stage of life and find that the faith of their youth no longer suffices, or they might realize they have an incomplete grasp of what they thought they believed. A person might receive objections to the faith they cannot answer, or they might encounter a new situation or moral problem that they do not have the resources to address. When these kinds of doubt arise, a Christian responds faithfully by seeking clarity, new information, and answers to their questions. The process can be challenging, but it also can be life-giving. The presence of doubt can force believers to think more deeply about God, the world, their neighbors, and themselves.

They will have to make new decisions about their commitment to God and whether they will live in obedience to Christ. This process often results in a clarified set of convictions, renewed confidence in God, and a fresh commitment to a life of discipleship.

Second, God can use doubt to prepare Christians for future challenges. Many Christians grow up in the church and inherit their faith from their families. In such situations a life of faith seems natural, and intellectual and moral objections to Christianity may never be considered. This can result in faith that is more assumed than affirmed. Yet untested faith often collapses because the believer does not have the resources to respond when suffering or criticism comes. This is where a time of doubt can be helpful. God can use the experience of doubt to prepare Christians for difficult moments and give them the resources to respond. As Timothy Keller puts it, a “faith without doubts is like a human body without any antibodies in it.”<sup>8</sup> Doubt produces strength for Christians precisely through the process of overcoming it. Facing doubt is difficult, and moving beyond it requires humility and courage in equal measure. The content of a Christian’s faith becomes refined as old thought patterns are discarded and new ones formed. This process of purification enriches the Christian life by supplying the believer with new knowledge. It also can produce the sort of spiritual and emotional strength necessary to face difficult objections and overcome spiritual challenges. People who struggle through periods of doubt learn the valuable lessons that they will not always have all the answers and that they are not self-sufficient. They also learn that Christ walks alongside Christians in times of doubt and that Christ will be there at the end of the journey.

Third, God uses doubt to produce sympathy for others. The process of wrestling with doubt can be humiliating for a Christian. Many believers are taught that confidence and joy are the hallmarks of the Christian life. Their churches often are shaped by liturgies of praise that have little room for lament. As a result, Christians can feel out of place when doubt arises. Answers are no longer ready to hand, confidence is hard to come by, and joy has been replaced by confusion and

anxiety. Questions and arguments against the faith that once seemed absurd now have new currency and relevance. This experience produces profound humility, but it also gives believers a new perspective on the people around them. They will have greater sympathy for those who simply cannot accept the claims of Christianity. Rather than flatly dismissing their objections to Christianity as absurd, the believer who had faced doubts will respect these arguments and the people making them. They also will show compassion for fellow believers who cannot muster the kind of confidence or joy considered by many to be normal. Christians who doubt not only will make room for these believers, but they also will seek to listen and learn from them. They will include their voices within their worship and see their contributions as vital to the church. God uses all of these things to foster charity within the Christian community. As the church expands its way of life to include those who do not fit the perceived template for a “good Christian,” it also opens its mind to the insights of those outside the faith from which much might be learned.

### **HOW SHOULD THE CHURCH RESPOND TO DOUBTERS?**

The Bible says directly: “Be merciful to those who doubt” (Jude 1:22). Showing mercy in this case means walking alongside someone with doubt as they work through their questions and problems. Christians sometimes pull away from doubters because the presence of doubt poses a challenge and brings discomfort. But a person dealing with doubt should never have to walk alone. Christians should seek out and embrace those who doubt with the goal not of fixing them but of loving and encouraging them.

When answers can be given to doubters’ questions, Christians should seek to give them. They should work with and alongside those who doubt to address their concerns and point the way forward. Yet the proper response to a doubters’ inquiries often is simply to listen to them. God is not challenged by the presence of doubt, and God does not need believers to rebuke doubters or immediately insist that they



resolve their problems. Sometimes the best response to doubt is to hear what the person has to say, seek to understand their confusion, and then bear their burden alongside them (Gal 6:2). When pressed to give an answer to a difficult question, sometimes the proper response is to say, “I do not know.” Above all, Christians can remain present in the lives of doubters. They can encourage the doubter to remain active in worship, remind them of the gospel, include them in the community, and serve them through concrete acts of love. In this way the church responds to doubters by directing them to Jesus Christ.

### WHAT SHOULD I DO WHEN I DOUBT?

The first thing to do is recognize that doubt is a normal part of the Christian life. God is infinite, but humans are finite. A relationship with God will always stretch humans beyond their capacities, particularly when it comes to knowledge and understanding. Questions will arise that cannot be answered, and the resulting lack of clarity may produce doubt. Yet as Hebrews 11 shows, dealing with doubt is simply part of what it means to live a life of faith. When we read the stories of the figures mentioned in this passage, it becomes clear that all of them experienced times of uncertainty and doubt. When Noah built the ark, he did so to prepare for “events yet unseen” that did not seem probable (v. 7). Abraham left his home for a new land while “not knowing where he was going” (v. 8). Later, he faced the challenge of believing God’s surprising promise that he would have many descendants “even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren” (v. 11). Moses risked Pharaoh’s anger by leading the Israelites out of Egypt, and he did so even though he had not seen God directly and had doubts about his own abilities (v. 27). Without clear answers, these figures and many others felt like “strangers and foreigners on the earth” who were “seeking a homeland” they had yet to find (vv. 13-14). Many of them died without receiving everything God had promised them (vv. 13, 39).

The fact that the Bible presents these often-uncertain people as examples of faithfulness demonstrates that a life of faith can include periods of doubt. A helpful way to be reminded of this lesson is to read

the Psalms. Many psalms offer exultant praise to God and express confidence in God’s sovereign care and love. But many other psalms articulate feelings of confusion, loneliness, and betrayal: “O LORD, why do you cast me off? Why do you hide your face from me?” (Ps 88:14). Expressions of doubt like these have been used by God’s people for centuries as part of their worship. They are expressions of faith in the midst of doubt, and they give Christians permission to offer similar expression to God. The Psalms serve as a training ground for Christians dealing with doubt. They teach believers to bring their uncertainties to God, with trust that doing so stands within God’s will. God does not turn away from doubters but embraces them. He uses Scripture to provide doubters with language to help them bring their doubts to him.

For the Christian this looks like presenting doubts directly to Jesus, just as the father did in Mark 9. It is significant that after providing the list of the imperfect examples of faith, Hebrews concludes that believers should “run with perseverance” while always “looking to Jesus” (Heb 12:1-2). This is how Christians should respond to doubt: they should keep their eyes fixed on Jesus while trusting that Jesus will work alongside and within them to help them find confidence. Often, life with Christ in the midst of doubt looks like everyday discipleship. Dietrich Bonhoeffer argues that the first disciples of Jesus learned to follow Christ *before* they began to believe in him. “The road to faith passes through obedience to Christ’s call,” Bonhoeffer says. “Because we are justified by faith, faith and obedience have to be distinguished. But their division must never destroy their unity, which lies in the reality that faith exists only in obedience, is never without obedience. Faith is only faith in deeds of obedience.”<sup>9</sup> A proper response to doubt is to live in obedience to Jesus. Sometimes a Christian’s obedience *to* Christ will have to carry them along when they struggle to believe *in* Christ. Among many other things, a life of obedience includes activities of prayer, worship, service to one’s neighbors, and love for one’s enemies. These kinds of things can be done even in the midst of great doubt.

The first disciples serve as an example in this regard. Just before Christ gave them the Great Commission and sent them out to share

the gospel to the world, Matthew notes that some of the disciples doubted Christ even as they worshiped him (Mt 28:17). The risen Jesus certainly knew about these disciples' doubt as they stood before him. But Christ did not pull back from them or ask them to figure everything out before they could begin to serve in his name. Their doubt did not disqualify them from their ministry. Instead, Christ looked directly at these doubters and then commissioned them. And as he did so, he made a promise that applies to every other doubter: "Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Mt 28:20).

## Chapter Ten

# Counseling

ELISHA EVELEIGH

**LUCY IS A TEENAGE CLIENT I HAD A FEW YEARS AGO.** By the time she arrived at my office, disheveled and droopy, she had experienced several episodes of depression that made it difficult for her to get out of bed all day. In addition to feeling suicidal at times, she also engaged in self-injury, had anxiety, and experienced panic attacks at school.

Many psychologists would not be surprised to hear that Lucy's mother also suffered from anxiety and depression, as well as her grandfather. Lucy's family regularly attended church, and she grew up going to Christian camps. Her parents were hesitant to seek psychological treatment for Lucy's symptoms but felt desperate to help their daughter. Initially, they took a valuable approach tried by many Christians and sought help from the church. They wondered if prayer, an improved spiritual life, and more faith might help Lucy feel better. She prayed, went to youth group when she could, read her Bible, and was aware of others praying for her.

Unfortunately, Lucy's symptoms continued to worsen, and she was hospitalized one night for feeling suicidal. Once she was stabilized, Lucy began weekly therapy sessions. In my office she described mounds of spiritual guilt about the fact that she continued to feel depressed. She wondered if God saw her, if he cared, if he was angry about something she did in the past.

Lucy told me how she went through life feeling numb and disinterested. She could not understand how her friends had the energy to care