

I have my doubts ...

Readings: Psalm 139 and Matthew 14²²⁻³³.

All Christians are familiar with having doubts; it is not something to be ashamed of, but they do need to be addressed: questions as basic as ‘does God exist?’ or hot potato topics such as ‘has science disproved God?’

We don’t resolve all our doubts before we become a Christian; at the point that the draw of Jesus Christ is greater than the total of our doubts, is when we turn to Christ (c.f. the father of the boy with the evil spirit who said to Jesus [Mk 9²⁴] “I believe, help thou my unbelief.” We are not talking about people choosing not to believe at all or about a sceptical attitude to God.

Faith and doubt are not mutually exclusive.

Good health: permanent battle to keep illness away.

Faith: permanent battle to keep doubt away. Every Christian has doubts at some stage of their Christian life.

Danger of getting proud of our incomplete knowledge. e.g. stars don’t need darkness to exist, even though we need darkness to see them. Christians need to approach the all knowing God in humility.

Faith is the opposite of doubt and has three components:

1. Trust in God
2. Growing understanding; and
3. Obedience to God.

Our Christian faith may be compared to a tree: a young tree can be relatively easily uprooted, a mature tree has deep roots and is

difficult to move. Don’t underestimate the importance of putting down roots of faith and understanding.

The doubts that affect you most may be determined by your experience or personality: e.g. if you have had a series of failed relationships, you might find it more difficult to grasp the constancy of God’s love for you.

Some types of doubt

- A. **Hesitation:** holding back while you digest a new situation; e.g. the women at the tomb of Jesus, a period of doubt followed by life changing belief.
- B. **Being in two minds doubt:** a matter of trying to keep our options open: Buridan’s donkey (must choose between two remote piles of food); if it does not choose, it dies. Our options are to ‘make Jesus our Lord’ or to ‘eat drink and be merry and ignore belief’. James 1⁶ addresses this form of doubt. It results in us treating Jesus as *a visitor* rather than as *our Lord*, as he demands. Becoming a Christian is to ask Jesus to be our Lord, nothing less: it might be compared with marriage. Before being married, one is free to ‘play the field’ but upon marriage, we commit to our spouse, to the exclusion of other relationships. Jesus referred to Christians as “in the world, but not of the world.”
- C. **Doubt as a state of mind:** some people are indecisive. Perhaps it was this trait in Thomas that made Jesus say to him “stop doubting and believe” [John 20²⁷]. Become an open and trusting person rather than a perennial doubter.
- D. **Doubting statements** (e.g. did Jesus exist?), which can be resolved by research, is to be contrasted with ...
- E. **Doubting a person:** e.g. doubting myself- I’m not sure if I’m a Christian, I can’t feel God, I feel so inadequate. It is so

important that we don't rely on our feelings alone; God's promises are true however I feel about them.

Dealing with doubt: three tips

Every thinking Christian has to deal with doubts at point of their Christian life

1. **A hostile culture:** recognise that we live in a broadly anti-Christian culture (not merely non-Christian). Yet, not as anti-Christian as the culture of the early Christians in the first century; but they were not overwhelmed: why? They grasped **the importance of belonging to a support group**, both to support others and to receive support as they lived out a life that was obedient to Christ.
2. **Doubt is like an attention seeking child:** the more attention you give to doubt, the more it dominates your thinking, leaching faith from you. Doubt is an opportunity to address an issue, but it must be addressed; that's why it is so important to have more mature Christians around us who can help us to address areas of doubt. Growing understanding leads to growing faith.
3. **Develop Christian habits/foundations:** begin as young as you can to gain Christian habits: e.g.
 - a. The priority of giving God time to speak to you each day through reading the bible and praying;
 - b. Giving God the first waking hours of each new week; that's why Christians make a priority of worshipping together on Sunday morning;
 - c. Generosity, both in our attitudes and in giving a proportion of all our income to God's work; and
 - d. Belonging to a support group to help others become and grow as Christians, as well as to be supported.

A story : I knew a child whose first words were "I can do it by myself". When learning to walk she would wave away help; when

learning to ride a bike, "I can do it by myself". My concern is that soon she will be learning to drive and I think I know what she will say.

We expect youngsters learning to walk to try, fail and try again and again; that's why at that stage of life, they are called 'toddlers.' What toddler said after falling again, says "that was clumsy of me, I don't think I am meant to walk, I'll settle for crawling for the rest of my life rather than go through that again?"

Stumbling/doubting is a learning opportunity!

In the gospel reading, (Mt 14²²⁻³³) Peter was a 'water-toddler'. He saw Jesus walking on the lake towards their boat and jumps out of the boat to meet him. His doubts get the better of him and he begins to sink. So what does Jesus do? The same thing that he does to us when we have doubts and stumble and fall- he reaches out his hand to pull us to safety.

Each of us has doubts and difficulties, let's accept the Lord's hand to help us to overcome our doubts and so to grow in faith in Him.

Further reading on this topic:

MccGrath: doubt- handling it honestly.

Ortberg: If you want to walk on water you have to get out of the boat

Guinness: God in the dark

Thomas a Kempis: the imitation of Christ

Brother Lawrence: the practice of the presence of God

Some questions for discussion/house groups

- In what ways can doubt paralyse your faith?
- What are the most common doubts that people have about Christianity?
- Is there something in your experience which you think makes you vulnerable to a particular area of doubt?

- How can you re-inforce your faith against doubt?
- Why is superficial faith so vulnerable to doubt?
- Is doubt insulting to God?
- What activities do you find most helpful in deepening your faith?
- What role do these things have in countering doubt:
 - Fellowship
 - Praise
 - Disciplines
 - Understanding?