

HOPE FOR CHRISTIANS WHO STRUGGLE WITH DOUBT®

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“When we wish to think of God, is there not something which distracts us and tempts us to think of something else? All this is evil and innate in us.”

~ Blaise Pascal, *Pensees*, 395 (478)

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I. Introduction:

Among the many Christians with whom I have had the privilege of participating in a rich dialogue about the nature of God, His presence, and His activities, I have discovered some struggling with doubt. To be sure, doubt is not uncommon—even among believers; it is part and parcel of being human in a world corrupted by the fall of humanity and the propensities for sin within each of us (Genesis 2-3). In fact, in my journeys over the years I have come into contact with believers from all sorts and walks of life who struggle with doubt. I have discovered that doubt is trans-cultural, affecting the uneducated and educated alike. Even in my own life I have had experienced moments of doubt.

If you are honest with yourself, perhaps you too have struggled with doubt. Like waves repeatedly hitting a sea-shore, you find that doubt is eroding your confidence in biblical Christianity. You wonder if what you believe really is true. As each day goes by you feel more and more uncertain or unconvinced about your faith. Suspicion has taken root in your life and you are not only holding other Christians in suspicion (especially Christian leaders), but you are even doubting the fundamental facts of Christianity.

It could be that you are one of those who do not struggle with doubt *until* some unfortunate calamity comes your way, impacting you and/or those you with whom you know and care. For example, your parents experienced a divorce. The pain of your parents divorcing was horrific. You wonder why they could not work it out since they claim to be Christians. You might even feel rejection and a lack of significance and value because they were not willing to work out their problems for your sake.

When a crisis like divorce hits you like a tornado, it is not unusual to find yourself spiraling downwards, doubting what you have always believed. The wreckage from such emotional pain can leave you questioning not only the reliability of Scripture and the goodness of God, but also His very existence.

Or perhaps you always find yourself struggling with indecisiveness, always teetering back and forth, wondering if you can really trust God with your circumstances? You want to trust Him, but you wonder if He really is here. You question His plan, presence, and power. As the years go by, you look back at your life and feel that all you have done is "sat" on the bleachers. You wonder what life would have been like if you had taken "the plunge" and pursued what you believed God for you. Your lack of trust in God has immobilized you, but you cannot help it; it is hard for you to trust God.

It might be that you cannot seem to find answers to your questions about the Christian faith? You go from church leader to church leader, and you still cannot seem to find answers to your questions about how they know Christianity is factual. You want to believe the things you are being taught but no one you know is able to competently answer why these truth-claims are true. The answers they provide are unsatisfactory, lacking intellectual and verifiable weightiness. And when you do share your doubts, you are told to simply "believe," or "have faith," or/and "pray more and read your Bible." You might even be instructed "not to ask questions" lest you be deemed "immature" or even "unfit" for your local church, especially if you happen to be a church leader.

Related, some of us are even afraid to discuss our doubts, even to those who know us best. We are afraid that we will be "looked down upon" or "mocked" by our church leaders or even our family member. So, in isolation, we struggle with our doubts, hoping that one day we may across some answer that will calm the raging storm within.

But then there are those of who are too embarrassed to share with others our struggles with doubt. We are so self-conscious, so ashamed to have these doubts. We may even blame ourselves for having such thoughts, deeming them to be sinful. Thus, we are afraid to share them. To be sure, it can be really hard to be vulnerable-even to those who accept us for who we are. Even if we do share with them our doubts, we might be afraid that will impede someone else in their walk with the Lord. So, we sit there longing to share what we are feeling, but we fearful about what the consequences will be.

Interestingly, not only have I discovered that many if not most of us struggle with doubt some time or another, but I have also observed those who "shout" the loudest with their "truth-claims" are the often the same people who struggle with the doubt. They are trying to convince themselves of these truth-claims by convincing everyone else. If everyone else can be convinced, then they can be convinced.

II. Three Common Types of Doubt:

But if one carefully listens *to all those who struggle with doubt*, one may be able to discern that at least three different types of doubt exist, namely, intellectual, factual doubt, emotional doubt, and volitional doubt.¹ Let us take a closer look at these three types of doubt in order to better gain some assistance when dealing with this painful topic.

Intellectual, factual doubt is a type of uncertainty that questions the “underpinnings of Christianity.” Factual doubts are typically generated by those who might be new to the Christian faith, thus they doubt out of lack of knowing. Other factual doubters have not adequately thought through the essential aspects of the Christian faith. Still others are suspicious of those essentials even though they may be well-learned in biblical doctrine and application.

This type of factual uncertainty may emerge when a believer faces certain challenges to the Christian faith and he or she does not have the knowledge to address to those questions, claims, or objections. From that experience, one’s faith may face some type of worldview fracturing and cause one to question their core assumptions in an unhealthy way.

For others, factual uncertainty finds expression when one focuses on competing truth claims or periphery matters that are not central to the facts of Christian faith (e.g., faith preceding regeneration or regeneration preceding faith; creation theory of the soul vs. traducian theory of the soul). To be sure, these issues are important and valuable to discuss, deliberate, and reflect upon as one considers the whole counsel of Scripture, the development of theology, how one doctrine relates or coheres with another, and the application of biblical truth to daily living. Notwithstanding, I have discovered that people’s intellectual doubts are generated about the truthfulness of Christianity when they are *fixated* on peripheral matters of theology. Thus, they commit the fallacy of reductionism namely by focusing on these competing ideas or views to the neglect of the central facts of Christianity. See, Christianity is as it strongest where it counts the most (e.g., Jesus Christ).

¹ These three categories were first presented to me by Dr. Gary Habermas at a national apologetics conference hosted by Southern Evangelical Seminary several years ago. I was spell-bound by the presentation for I have never heard such a frank lecture about believers who doubt their Christian faith—even though I have already had multiple private conversations with all sorts of Christians who have expressed doubt to me. Dr. Habermas’ lecture on the subject of doubt was excellent, right-on, and dynamically liberating to so many people. Other than his incredible expertise on the historical case for the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ, he gives a number of presentations on dealing with doubt. Habermas’ years of personal ministry and professional studies on doubt was published by Moody Press in a book titled, *Believers Who Doubt*. This book is available free of charge on his personal website: www.garyhabermas.com. I’m personally indebted to his classifications and delineations of doubt.

Factual doubt is relieved when we anchor ourselves upon the central truths Christianity and maintain a proper perspective regarding peripheral and debatable matters. Intellectual uncertainty is relieved when one examines the weighty explanatory power of the facts of Christianity and the analytical, evidential, historical, existential, and experiential, and rational justifications that substantiate them.²

Emotional Doubt emerges from psychological conditions whereby personal anxiety, fear, depression, and other emotions like despondency find expression. How does this come about? A wide range of factors can contribute to this type of doubt. Since our situations seem to oscillate between moments of stability and moments of instability (moments of "bad luck" and moments of "good luck"), it is obvious that our psychological states can be affected; there is a dynamic interplay between ourselves and our environment. Therefore, emotional doubt comes about when we allow our situations or environment to control or dictate our spirituality, our outlook, and our moods.

For some, it is not necessarily external circumstances but internal issues (e.g., medical causes like a very low serotonin level) that are at work. But for many of us we judge our circumstances from our feelings and not what from what we already know to be biblically true. But whether those factors are external, internal, or perhaps both, when those times occur, our misinterpretation of these events can be quite painful and debilitating.

See, we often try to remedy emotional doubt with arguments and evidences but come to discover that little progress is ever made. We go from one apologetic book to another, looking for answers but never finding what will satisfy or fix those doubts. Why? For emotional doubters, facts are not necessarily what are immediately needed. Rather, emotional doubters interpret their situation with an unbiblical outlook, an emotive state of mind. As a result, their misinterpretation of the event (s) generates emotional pain, doubt, and inner turmoil. Thus, this pain is often cloaked or misinterpreted as being a problem of intellectual, factual doubt. But upon careful examination, you find that their worldview is typically riddled with contradictions, changes, and undeveloped notions and "charged" with emotional language.

As we consider emotional doubt let us briefly consider 2 Corinthians 12:7-10 whereby we discover that the Apostle Paul was given a "thorn in the flesh." Though we do not know the nature of the thorn, we do know the thorn was real, painful, and perhaps chronic.

² If you are experiencing intellectual factual doubt, I would encourage you to carefully read, Norman Geisler & Frank Turek's, *I Don't Have Enough Faith to be An Atheist* and Josh McDowell's *New Evidence that Demands a Verdict*. If you are looking for a more advanced work on arguments and evidences for Christianity, consider Douglas Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics: A Comprehensive Case for the Christian Faith*.

Moreover, we know why this faithful servant received this thorn. To be sure, Paul did not receive this thorn as a form of chastisement by for some particular vice or hidden sin he was cultivating. No, Paul confesses that the thorn in the flesh was preventive in nature (see verse 7). The thorn was meant to keep him from "exalting himself", that is, becoming conceited.

Now three times the apostle pleaded with the Lord. Jesus Christ to remove the thorn. While Jesus responded to his request, He did not choose to alleviate the pain or remove the thorn. Rather, Jesus said in verse 2 Corinthians 12:9, *"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."*

How did Paul respond to Jesus' course of action? If Paul did not have *the proper belief that Jesus is good all the time*, he could have developed a (1) victimized "woe is me" mindset and start questioning the perfect character of God, (2) spiral into depression, questioning the words, promises, and assurances of Jesus Christ as recorded in the Gospels, or (3) somehow think God is still holding his past transgressions against him for his persecution of the church, saying something like "God is not trustworthy to forgive all your sins." No, the apostle Paul did not allow his pain or his circumstances to control his outlook and interpretation of this event. Rather, after the post-ascension Jesus spoke those words of comfort to Paul, the apostle to the gentiles immediately proclaimed in response (vv. 9-10), "Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me."¹⁰ For the sake of Christ, then I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong." He rejoices not only in his thorn of affliction, but also in view of the wide array of troubles he experiences.

In sum, when I meet a doubter, more times than not, they are emotional doubters. As I talk with them and as I have discovered in my own life, emotional pain can be quite painful. But we have to realize that emotional doubt all too often comes about when we do not interpret our circumstance from the lens of biblical truth, namely, the whole counsel of the Word of God.

Whether it is out of biblical ignorance of Scripture, inaccurate teachings, poor advice, judging a situation, reflecting upon a painful event, or experiencing some type of calamity, we generate emotional mood-related doubt from "bad beliefs." In other words, we look upon a situation and interpret from beliefs that are not firmly based in Scripture. We then cast this wrong attitude upon such things as the character of an infinite and sovereign all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good God, the reliability of Scripture, the

testimony of Jesus Christ, and the love God has for each of us. But the real problem is not arguments and evidences, but bad beliefs.

As emotional doubters we may also judge our circumstances from feelings rather than from what is biblically true. The problem is that our feelings come and go; our emotions are fluid-like as we go about our daily lives perceiving physical and mental sensations and expressing our emotions. Instead of allow ourselves to be controlled by truth, we allow our disposition and outlook to be controlled by our sensibilities, that is, a particular impression we feel regardless if it corresponds to reality and identifies things as they truly are.

To be sure, if the emotional doubt is internally caused (e.g., bipolar; lack of sleep), then appropriate medical care is necessary.

While the remedy for factual doubters is the facts, emotional doubters need to recognize how their "bad beliefs" or emotions are controlling their interpretation of the difficulties that inevitably come our way and replace those "bad beliefs" with biblical truth and not allow one's emotions to become unruly.

Discipline thinking is required for those who judge their situations emotionally. Now, this is not to mean that one should ignore or nullify emotions and attempt to develop a Stoic-like outlook. God gave us emotions and we should allow them to flourish properly. But for those of us who allow our circumstances or emotions to dictate our outlook, the inculcation of discipline is required. Biblical thinking needs to govern our outlook upon the world regardless of our feelings. While our feelings can serve us well, when they control us, we eventually find ourselves regretting what follows (e.g., unwarranted anger). Therefore, each time you find yourself misinterpreting an event, namely seeing an event from an unbiblical perspective, stop yourself, examine the Scripture accurately and holistically, and count on God's promises to be true. Quit thinking wrong thoughts! Pray!

Volitional doubt is rooted in the will, typically expressed in one's customary behavior, desires, inclinations, and processes of decision-making. The bottom line with those who struggle with volitional doubt is that they do not align their will with God's will in the moment-by-moment details of daily living; volitional doubter act out their doubt. But the reasons for not aligning their will with God's will are multifarious. Let us now consider the various types of volitional doubt.

Volitional doubters often possess a weak faith. As a result of not relying on God, they continually waver between two or more positions. Some of them are continually tossed to and fro by the waves of changing circumstances and indecisiveness (James 1:6-8).

Whether this weak faith is willful, that is, a deliberate choice not to intimately know God's Word) or un-willful (ignorance; poor teaching), their faith is not strong enough to face their continual changing circumstances with Christ-like thinking. Therefore, doubt emerges from a weak faith and is evident in their failure to consistently trust God with their circumstances.

This way of living is also similar to those who have never surrendered their will to Jesus Christ (Romans 12:1-2; 2 Corinthians 5:9-10). Because these believers have not grown from "babes in Christ" to "adults" in their faith, intentional or unintentional, they struggle with trusting God with any circumstance, whether big or small (1 Corinthians 2-3). For some, they are not in a church where Scripture is taught on a dynamic, rich level. Years have gone by and still the teaching in their local church is shallow. In fact, I have discovered so many believers who have no substantive idea on how to grow spiritually mature after they place their faith in Jesus Christ for salvation. As a result of not knowing how to grow spiritually mature, they have not come to the point in their spiritual lives whereby they have surrendered themselves to Jesus Christ in the choices they make, allowing Him to be Lord over their lives.³

Still, there are other volitional doubters who do not align their will with God's will because they are arrogant and self-serving. Because "pride" has taken up root in their lives, they would rather make their own decisions than submit to God's will. In fact, they may even think about Him while making decisions apart from Him.

Time and time again, I have come across believers whose superiority-haughty type complex creates a lack of trust in following God on His terms. They may even want to serve God, but they only want to serve Him on their terms. Sadly, by choosing to do so, they do not receive the benefit of a shared history that flows from depending upon God. See, remembrance of what He has done for and through you can be a powerful force in trusting God with present difficulties.

It seems to me that a few volitional doubters possess a personality trait, a sort of doubting complex that is rooted in their unique personality. In those cases, doubt is not only uttered when it comes to Christian faith and practice, but also in any and every area of life. Thus, their will is *saturated with suspicion in anything and everyone*. In other

³ If ignorance is keeping you from trusting God with your circumstances, perhaps because you are a new believer in Jesus Christ or because you have never been taught the deeper truths of the spiritual life, then I would encourage you to purchase J. Dwight Pentecost's book, *Designed to be Like Him*. This book is not only my favorite book on how to grow spiritually mature, but is also very wide-ranging, dealing with all sorts of issues that are related to becoming all that God wants you to be. Read it carefully. If given the time, please drop me a note at this website to let me know how this book helped you.

words, there is a propensity not to trust anything or anyone. So, we have to be observant in understanding where uncertainty is placed in order to discover what kind of a volitional doubter one may be. One pastoral help in dealing with this type of doubt is to not only gain confidence in the central claims of Christianity, but also to learn discipline in one's thinking. We can manage this type of propensity by developing right thinking through sound justification and repetition.

Lastly, I have discovered that many volitional doubters are those who have cultivated a fleshly/sinful habit or tendency in their lives. This has created some intimacy issues with God. This distance, which they caused, is relationally and not positionally connected. Like a daughter who has estranged herself from her father, she still retains membership in God's family, but because she has chosen to pursue a sinful lifestyle or developed a lust for a particular sin, her intimate relations with God is now distant. Likewise, believers who delight in, cultivate, and pursue anything that is contrary to the character of God, are in a state of rebellion against Him. In that state of rebellion one senses that God is distant to them. As a result of this estranged relationship, doubt, guilt, a lack of peace, joylessness, and a lack of fulfillment emerges.

It is so sad to watch people I know and love develop an appetite for a particular sin-for sin leads them to places they never thought they would go, changing them in ways they (and we) never thought possible. As a result, we forget how good God has been to us; our thinking about God becomes obscure. We become more and more deceived in an effort to suppress what we know to be true. Our self-deception in rationalizing our behavior seems to know no boundaries as we become taken in by our own lies.⁴

The remedy for this type of volitional doubt, a doubt that emerges from delighting in sin more than in God, is the sincere confession of sin as stated in 1 John 1:9: *"If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."* We must turn away from that sin by turning back to God, sincerely acknowledging to Him that what we have done is wrong. The beautiful fact of Scripture is that God can never love us anymore or any less; He loves us perfectly-no matter what we have done.

But if the hunger for this sin keeps finding expression in your life, not only continue to confess your sin after you yield to the temptation, but also learn how to put to death these sinful habits and desires by developing a strategy to put it to death-all in the Lord's

⁴ Check out my chart, "Spiritual Degeneration" (under the tab spiritual life) at my website: www.prshockley.org for a closer look at what is involved when we succumb to sin.

strength (Romans 8:13; Colossians 3:5).⁵ See, every time you give into the temptation, you are giving that sin "fertilizer." The appetite for that sin will become greater.

Sadly, among those who yield to sin and refuse to turn back to the Lord, I have observed that they not only fail to understand the source of their doubt, but they also compound their doubt with emotional and factual doubts in an effort to mask their rebellion against God. Coupled with feelings of guilt and the constant fear that they are constantly being judged by others, emotional and factual doubts converge and devolve into a very painful plight. They take certain consequences of sin as a personal indictment that their friends and loved ones no longer care for them. Like Blaise Pascal states:

Those who do not love truth excuse themselves on the grounds that it is disputed and that very many people deny it. Thus their error is solely due to the fact that they love neither truth nor charity, and so they have no excuse [176 (261)].

But thankfully, no matter how far we drift away in our intimacy with God, we have the opportunity to turn to Him in confession and repentance, and experience the blessing of intimacy with God. Oh, How He loves you and me! ~ Romans 8:31-39.

III. Conclusion:

In conclusion, if you are a believer in Jesus Christ, believing that He died on the cross for your sins and rose bodily from the dead, then please know that these three types of unhealthy doubt does not have to be your companion. We have examined three types of doubt: intellectual, factual doubt, emotional doubt, and volitional doubt. While other types of doubt may exist, my hope is that this brief study will offer hope to those of us who struggles with doubt, whether it is emerges in your life intellectually, emotionally, and/or volitionally, chronically, seasonally, or for a very brief period of time.⁶

³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am sure that neither death nor life, not angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

⁵ I use an 8-point strategy for the putting to death that continues to haunt my footsteps. See my PowerPoint on "Mortification of Sin" and "Sanctification Chart" (under the tab spiritual life) at my website: www.prshockley.org.

⁶ Other than Gary Habermas' excellent work on doubt, titled, *Dealing with Doubt*, I whole heartily recommend Os Guinness' *God in the Dark: The Assurance of Faith Beyond a Shadow of Doubt* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1996).