FAITH & DOUBT

Lars Wilhelmsson
“Brothers, stop thinking like children.

In regard to evil be infants,

but in your thinking be adults.”

--I Corinthians 14:20
“Most Christians would rather die than think—in fact they do.”
--Bertrand Russell

“There lives more faith in honest doubt, believe me, than in half the creeds.”
--Alfred Tennyson

“Reason’s last step is the recognition that there are an infinite number of things
that are beyond it.”
--Blaise Pascal

Is there a God? Has not evolution replaced the need for God? Why is there so much evil
in the world? How can a God who is good, just and powerful allow the innocent to suffer? When
you are dead, is that not the end? These are some of the difficult questions that have troubled
reflective human beings throughout history.

Skeptics tend to blame God, if they believe there is a God, for not giving us clearer
evidence. The last possibility that many will raise is that the problem in understanding is their
own. Could it be that the problem is not God’s failure to offer sufficient evidence, but in the
failure of the human mind to see things as they really are?

In the face of challenging questions Christians often respond with simplistic and naive
answers. Many are content to embrace faith without thought. They have confused childish faith
with its refusal to learn the things of God in depth with childlike faith and its emphasis on
implicit trust. But as Christians we are called to maturity:

“When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as
a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things” (I Corinthians 13:11).

To live wisely and well we must cultivate our minds so we can think biblically. Christian
philosopher Os Guinness in his book, Fit Bodies Fat Minds, shows how popular culture has
dumbed down society in general and evangelicalism in particular. Sadly, anti-intellectualism is
alive and well in the church. Its tendency to discount the importance of truth and the life of the
mind is dangerous in a culture that is increasingly sensuous, emotional and mystical. With its
emphasis on the physical, our culture has become characterized by fit bodies but fat minds
(“mental hedonism”).

Someone said to Father Brown, G. K. Chesterton’s remarkable detective priest, “I’m a
practical man; I pay little attention to theology and philosophy.” Father Brown peremptively
responds, “You will never be practical until you do.” Knowing what God is like and living
accordingly is the most practical thing we can do. And that is theology. Antiintellectualism is
sinful for it is disobedience to Christ’s first commandment: a failure to love God with our
minds as well as our hearts (Matthew 22:37; Mark 12:30; Luke 10:27). Loving God with all our
mind is not elitism or intellectual snobbery, but obedience to His command. Failure to obey this
command is deadly since ideas have such great consequences.
We only need to consider Galileo’s proposal to the church that the earth rotated around the sun to see the eventual benefits of good thinking and the theory of evolution as an example of the tragedy of bad thinking. Galileo’s ideas, initially fought by the church, helped launch modern science and its tremendous technological breakthroughs. The theory of evolution has totally taken over our educational system with its secular agenda that has produced relativism, in which there are no absolutes and intellectual, moral and spiritual chaos reign.6

Ideas matter! Thus ideas must not be ignored and the questions they provoke must not be ignored. Ideas deserve intelligent and prayerful reflection and questions deserve thoughtful and reasonable answers.

My first exposure to challenging questions was in college when I worked with an atheist. We often discussed and debated issues common to most people in this world. Being a philosophy major helped to whet my appetite for debates in the field of philosophy, religion, and theology.

Some of us may respond that since we are not philosophers or theologians we do not need to be concerned about such issues. But being human and made in the image and likeness of God means we are rational beings with the capacity for self-awareness or self-transcendence. Built into our nature is a concern for fundamental or crucial questions about the nature of human life--its ultimate meaning and destiny. To be human is to make value judgments--decisions about what we should do in a given situation, decisions about good and evil, right and wrong and how we will live our lives. Being rational means that challenging questions arise as we reflect on life. Such questions begin very early in life, in some cases as early as the age of four. Philosophical thinking is something every rational person does, whether at a very rudimentary or a quite sophisticated level (a la St. Thomas Aquinas).

We carefully avoid the subject of death as seen in the genteel euphemisms of the funeral industry. Our obsession with youthful appearance and beauty, as shown by the size of the plastic surgery, cosmetics and health-club industries, is doubtless also rooted in our concern for our finiteness, that is, our fear of growing old and dying, our unwillingness to face the fact of our own mortality? The offices of psychiatrists and psychologists are flooded with people who grapple with a sense of emptiness and anxiety, which is probably a concern about meaning—of their lives and the larger purposes of history and life itself.

While I have encountered people who are fairly successful at ignoring life’s ultimate questions, during thirty years of ministry I have been impressed with the number of times such questions surface in conversations, whether with Christians or non-Christians. This has been the case whether I was dealing with my children as a parent, or dealing with youth as a youth minister, with undergraduates as a college professor, graduate students as a seminary professor, people of different cultures (Cuba and Peru) as a part-time missionary, or a cross section of people as a pastor. The list of basic questions remains quite similar.
We all exercise faith. Every time we eat in a restaurant or get a prescription for medicine at the pharmacy we exercise faith. But believing something doesn’t make it true any more than refusing to believe something doesn’t make it false. Truth is independent of our belief or disbelief. The overriding question is whether the Christian faith is true and whether it makes sense.

PURPOSES

Thirteen-century theologian Anselm defined theology as “faith seeking understanding.” One of the purposes of this book is to help fellow Christians find more understanding for their faith. Christians need to realize that there is intellectual integrity to their faith. The Christian faith is also a rational faith. Too often Christians are intimidated by questions they feel have no answers. And so they duck the big questions and the real issues. Some see their faith as an irrational leap in the dark. They believe because they believe. Hopefully this book will give Christians confidence by showing them that the Christian faith has nothing to fear and everything to gain by opening itself up to philosophical examination. It is thus my desire to buttress the faith of believers and give them tools to understand and respond to objections to the faith.

As a Christian, I am also interested in sharing my faith and my reasons for holding those beliefs. I get impatient with Christians who regard intellectual pursuit as somehow incompatible with Christian faith. Antiintellectualism has hindered serious, thoughtful people from considering the Christian faith and coming to Christ. So another purpose for writing this book is to help non-Christians discover that the Christian religion is neither illogical nor irrational, but is suprarational. And since it is suprarational it requires faith as well as reason.

This book was written for the general reader who wants to explore life’s ultimate questions. Therefore, I have tried to keep the issues as simple as possible. Yet as someone said, “Some people have a simple answer to everything, and it is usually wrong.” Simplistic answers do more harm than good. Obviously some questions are easier to answer than others as will be evident. Some will yield only to mystery, though aspects may become clearer through discussion. I do not pretend to answer any, much less, all questions in a comprehensive manner. Rather I hope to shed some light on the subject. In some cases the issues may become even more complex as they are analyzed. That does not mean that there are no answers, but rather that God’s thoughts and ways are not our thoughts and ways and that His thoughts and ways are higher than ours (Isaiah 55:8,9). The complexity of some issues should lead us to humility and thus dependence as we come to realize the majesty and greatness of Almighty God and our own limitations.

When a young girl was asked what faith is, she answered,

“Faith is believing something you know isn’t true.”
Doubt is Essential

Faith is foundational. But doubt also plays a role. After all, we are born questioners. We only have to look at the wonderment of a little child in his eyes before he can speak. The child’s first word when he begins a sentence is “why.” Children bubble over with questions about everything that moves, shines, and changes their little world. Doubt is the necessary corollary to human inquisitiveness. Doubt is an inevitable thing which must not be crushed. It is a part of man as God made him. Doubt is thus the prelude of knowledge.

Many people do not deal with their doubts about religion because their religion is not real to them. For example, if you tell someone that God put a billion stars in the sky, he may readily believe you. But if that same person sees a “wet paint” sign, he will likely touch it to find out.

Socrates declared that “the unexamined life is not worth having.” Faith that has never probed the hard questions is merely indoctrination and not yet doctrine. If one cares enough to ask questions about God, there is far more hope for him than if he is indifferent.

Most people tend to overcompensate. People who are riddled with doubts tend to be dogmatists who believe they are never wrong. Justice Hitz, who presided over the Federal Appeals Court of Washington, one day leaned over the bench and said to a protesting lawyer, “My friend, this court is often in error, but never in doubt.” “Often in error, but never in doubt” describes many in the church. Could it be that if we were more often in doubt, we might be less often in error?

When Willard Sperry was dean of Harvard Divinity School he reported that a prominent British churchman with whom he shared the platform in a discussion shot at him the unexpected question, “Has it ever occurred to you that the Christian religion may not be true?” To this question Dean Sperry replied, “Yes, certainly. And I do not know that I could feel I really believed it unless at times I had doubted it.”

Faith is always contending with doubt. While a few people who may have, once and for all, settled all their doubts or never really had any, most of us are like the man in the gospel who said, “Lord, I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief” (Mark 9:24). Legitimate faith must face doubt for it is expressed as a result of individual conviction. Jesus’ question to His disciples was, “But what about you, who do you say I am?” (Mark 8:29). People must answer this question for themselves, in spite of our strong desire to provide an answer for them.

Malcolm Muggeridge once described his lifelong friend (Alec Vidler) as “the quintessential Anglican, who loves God with his whole heart and doubts him with his whole mind.” The psalmist must have been an Anglican for his 77th Psalm begins with doubt:

“I remembered You, O God, and I groaned; I mused, and my spirit grew faint.”

(Psalms 77:3)
Remembrance of God’s past mercies only intensifies David’s present perplexity. God’s failure to act now is so troubling that he cannot sleep (Psalm 3:5; 4:8) and words fail.

Most of us have been there. We have cried to God and wondered if He heard us. We have spent sleepless nights, and no matter what our friends said, or what devotional material we read, we could find no comfort. The psalmist was so disturbed that when he remembered God, all he could do was groan. God wasn’t doing for him what he wanted Him to do.

Examples

The Bible is filled with people who grappled with doubt. Job in the Old Testament garnered fame for his pointed questions to God about suffering (e.g. Job 3:23; 10:3). The prophet Habbakuk had similar questions. In the New Testament we have John the Baptist who, though he had met Jesus and baptized Him, later wondered whether Jesus was indeed the Messiah (Matthew 11:2-6; Luke 7:18-23). Jesus didn’t criticize John for his question, but rather told him to look at the evidence and not lose faith. Doubting Thomas is perhaps the most notorious questioner in the Bible (John 20:24-29). He boldly declared that he wouldn’t believe that Jesus had really risen from the dead unless he could see Jesus for Himself, and even touch His wounds. When he finally saw Jesus again, what did Jesus tell him? “Ok, Thomas, do it. Touch Me. Now stop doubting and believe.” But He went on to say, “Thomas, you’ve got it easy because you can see Me. But greater blessings will go to those who haven’t seen Me and yet still believe.” Jesus did not condemn Thomas for doubting—instead, He answered Thomas’ doubt and warned him that in the future it would be even more difficult to believe.

Similarly, some of us are riddled with doubt because we find it difficult to reconcile the Christian faith with life as we understand it. Doubts do not necessarily deny or replace faith, but they do question and prod it. They are essential because the only secure faith is that which has faced doubts honestly.

What is Faith?

Let us go back to the young girl’s definition of faith. Is it really believing what we know isn’t true? Is biblical faith mere superstition? Or is it blind optimism or a manufactured “hope-so” feeling? Definitely not! Neither is it mere intellectual assent to doctrine. But what is it? It has two basic ingredients which deal with both objective and subjective aspects:

1) Intellectual Content—Truth revealed by God (which has to do with facts) and,

2) Acceptance and Trust—Belief and commitment to truth and to the God who is Truth.
Intellectual content has to do with the **objective** aspect of faith and acceptance, and trust belongs to the **subjective** realm. Paul Little warns:

“It is not enough to know *what* we believe. Believing something doesn’t make it true. A thing is true or not regardless of whether anyone believes it.”

Faith, then, is only as good as its object, and the object of our Christian faith is the God revealed in Scripture. Faith is not some “feeling” we manufacture. It is our total response to what we believe God has revealed in His Word, the Bible. “Faith,” as John Stott points out, is “a *reasoning trust*, a trust which reckons *thoughtfully* and *confidently* upon the *trustworthiness* of God.”

Josh McDowell defines faith as “the assurance of the heart in the adequacy of the evidence.” God has provided us with more than enough evidence to test the truthfulness of His revelation. Christianity is an historical religion and can be tested in the same way any history can. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, the British preacher, made the following penetrating comment as he analyzed the meaning of Matthew 6:30:

“**Faith**, according to our Lord’s teaching in this paragraph, is **primarily thinking**; and the whole trouble with man of little faith is that he does not think. He allows circumstances to bludgeon him. . . . We must spend more time studying our Lord’s lessons in observation and deduction. The Bible is full of **logic**, and we must never think of faith as something purely mystical. We do not just sit down in an armchair and expect marvelous things to happen to us. That is not Christian faith. Christian faith is essentially thinking. . . . Faith, if you like, can be defined like this: It is a man insisting upon thinking when everything seems determined to bludgeon and knock him down in an intellectual sense. The trouble with the person of little faith is that, instead of controlling his own thought, his thought is being controlled by something else. . . . That is the essence of worry. . . . That is not thought; that is the absence of thought, a failure to think.” (Emphasis added)

The Bible implies rational truth in that we are encouraged to give a defense of our faith:

“Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the **reason for the hope** that you have” (I Peter 3:15).

An intelligent faith is as necessary as an exuberant one. Reason without joy is like food without seasoning; joy without reason like a diet of spice without staples. We need not only freer spirits; we need richer understanding.
The biblical concept of faith presupposes or assumes the ability of every Christian to defend his faith. It is said of Paul:

“He talked and debated with the Grecian Jews, but they tried to kill him. . . As his custom was, Paul went into the synagogue and on three Sabbath days he reasoned [or argued] with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead . . . so he reasoned [or argued] in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the market-place day by day with those who happened to be there” (Acts 9:29; 17:2,17).

Here we see how Paul argued the rationality of the Christian faith. True faith is not a matter of personal resolve--how much certainty we can muster--but is dependent upon the God in whom we believe.

In One Sense All People Live by Faith

It is noteworthy that the Bible states over and over again, “The righteous will live by faith.”

This is first stated in the Old Testament by the prophet Habakkuk (2:4) and later quoted by the apostle Paul in his books written to Christians in Rome (Romans 1:17), Galatia (Galatians 3:11), and to Hebrew Christians (Jewish converts—Hebrews 10:38).

In one sense, all people live by faith. There is no way for anyone not to live by faith. This is so whether it is by biblical faith or just by faith in other factors. Every time we go to a doctor or see a pharmacist we exercise faith. Every time we sit down on a chair we exercise faith in that chair since we believe it will hold us up. Every time we turn on the light we exercise faith in electricity, which no sound scientist claims to totally understand. To board an airplane requires faith.

Faith can be a dangerous thing. A bit of healthy disbelief is sometimes as needful as faith for the welfare of our souls. We must not be too quick to believe. A reverent skepticism should be cultivated for it will keep us from foolish quagmires. It is no sin to doubt some things, but it may be fatal to believe everything.

While it is impossible to please God without faith (Hebrews 11:6) gullibility will lead us to strange places. A. W. Tozer put it,

“The man who believes everything is as far from God as the man who refuses to believe anything.”10
Credulity does not honor God since it shows a quick readiness to believe anybody. Often credulous people accept anything as long as it is unusual, and the more unusual it is the more ardently they will believe. The gullible mentality is like the ostrich who will gulp down anything that looks interesting—an orange, a tennis ball, a pocketknife, etc.

Discrimination is essential because though we are called upon to believe certain things, it does not mean that we are to believe everything. Just because we are called to believe the invisible does not mean that we must automatically believe the incredible. A healthy skepticism is essential to our ability to recognize and expose counterfeits of the truth. But doubt not rooted in belief will be untrustworthy. As someone has said, “He who stands for nothing will fall for anything.”

**Doubt, Deny, Believe**

Blaise Pascal, the French mathematician and theologian, said that Christians must learn to **doubt**, to **deny**, and to **believe** if they are to become mature. Those who cannot doubt and deny in a responsible manner cannot reasonably believe.

Along with our faith in God there must be a healthy disbelief of everything that is toxic to that faith. It is not possible to accept or accommodate every point of view. Tolerance must not be elevated in prominence to the exclusion or neglect of other intellectual and spiritual virtues. We are tempted to assume that somehow contradictory points of view, rather than being mutually exclusive, are somehow ultimately to be reconciled in some way. If the claims of Christianity are true, then a good many other theories and religious notions are false.

**Ultimately the Christian faith must be examined and proven in experience.** While our faith must be intellectually rigorous, we must possess our beliefs personally and in costly ways. This means we do not simply borrow our beliefs from others or believe the truth for wrong or insufficient reasons. It also means that believing results in behaving. The moral condition of the heart helps shape what and how we believe. While a wicked heart will prevent us from believing in truth, a humble and obedient heart yields better results.

John Calvin said once that there was a “shameless fellow” who asked a pious man what God had done before the creation of the world. The old saint countered that He’d been “building hell for the curious.” But in defense of the skeptic, is it not possible that there is more reasonable faith in some people’s doubt than in others’ certainty.
All of us are good at judging others, but the greater value lies in judging ourselves—doubting, probing, and questioning. Most of the time, when a person does that, it gives assurance of his sincerity. In this age when deception is so widespread, being an honest doubter is important. An honest doubter is one who can honestly express his doubts.

An antiintellectual attitude on the part of Christians is not worthy of the Christian faith. Such a posture leads non-Christians to conclude that their honest questions have no answers. Furthermore, such an attitude can lead the believer to begin to doubt his own beliefs. John Stott stated,

“We cannot pander to a man’s intellectual arrogance, but we must cater to his intellectual integrity.”11 (Emphasis added)

Since Christianity requires that man’s whole being—inclent, emotions, and will—must be converted, the intellect must be included if there is to be genuine conversion. Therefore thoughtful non-Christians with honest questions about the faith need to be addressed in intelligent and loving ways by Christians. If non-Christians constantly silence Christians with their questions, Christians will confirm non-Christians in their unbelief.

Beyond Reason

This does not mean that we Christians have all the answers. Blaise Pascal also pointed out that the supreme function of reason is to show man that some things are beyond reason. However, Jesus referred to Himself as the Truth,

“Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:32).

This means that there are some absolutes on which to base our lives and destiny.

Blaise Pascal understood the limitations of reason. He put it,

“The supreme function of reason is to show man that some things are beyond reason.”12 (Emphasis added)

He said of the heart,

“The heart has its reasons that the reason cannot know.”13 (Emphasis added)

One reason why this quote carries such weight is because he happened to be one of the greatest men of science who ever lived. He had the intellect of a genius, but he was also, after his conversion, a man of spiritual perceptiveness who understood the truth of Jesus’ statement to Thomas:

“Blessed are they who have not seen and yet have believed.”
Pascal’s respect for the reasons of the heart had its source in his own conversion experience. It is a fascinating story derived from the discovery of a piece of parchment sewn into the lining of his clothing and not found until after he had died. It represented a series of notes, scribbled first on a scrap of paper, in which this man, always the painstaking observer, took down his impressions of what God was saying to him while He was saving him. The date is carefully noted along with how he felt and what he sensed and heard. Some of the text is Scripture, and some is his own attempt to express the inexpressible. Then comes this passage:

“God of Abraham! God of Isaac! God of Jacob!
Not of the philosophers and scholars.
God of Jesus Christ!
Thy God shall be my God.”

And the conclusion:

“He is to be found only in the ways taught in the Gospel.”

The man of science had learned first hand that there is a way of being sure that is fully as reliable as the weighing of sensory evidence. God is able to make Himself known immediately to the heart of the one who truly seeks Him.

The person who sincerely seeks truth, and who is in earnest about overcoming doubt, will keep saying to himself that simply because he fails to see something does not mean that that thing in nonexistent. Because Nicodemus could not comprehend the new birth it does not follow that spiritual regeneration is impossible. Thomas had not seen the print of the nails in Jesus’ hands, but did that disprove the fact of the resurrection? Said Dean Inge,

“If the whole of a distant landscape, which others have described to me, is a mere blur to my eyes, I infer either that there is a fog, which will pass away soon, or that there is something wrong with my vision.”

Challenging Questions

There are challenging questions or objections to Christianity in this book! Some more so than others. Pat answers simply will not do. Yet the Christian faith presents intelligent answers that may not solve all problems, but that provide the best alternative to other competing alternatives.

Doubt can play an important role if it helps to make us probe the difficult questions we face and thus keeps us honest and reflective in our life of faith. We need to keep in mind that faith is not only intellectual certainty, but a spiritual adventure. Therefore one becomes sure of things, not merely by cognition, but by experimentation. Certitude often lies, not at the conclusion of a discussion, but at the end of an adventure. Thus certainty may be born, not only by a reasoned argument, but by living experience (albeit such experience, to be valid, must not contradict Scripture).
Loyalty and obedience to what truth and light we do possess open the way for the entrance of more truth. Until we act on the basis of what we do know, we cannot expect and do not deserve further revelation. While we cannot always think our way out of doubt, we can proceed on the basis of our certainties, waiting for and expecting further light.

We cannot completely escape from unsolved mysteries and unanswered problems, but we can push forward on the basis of what we do know and believe.
NOTES