

Shepherding Individuals Dealing with Doubt

Ted Witzig, Jr.
ETR Apologetics Conference
October 10, 2020 – Indianapolis AC Church

1

Where Do Doubts Come From?

- ▶ College student who doubts the beliefs of his childhood due to naturalistic explanations of the universe.
- ▶ Parents who grieve the tragic death of a child.
- ▶ A young woman who experiences a rape.
- ▶ When the proposal(s) that you prayed over and sought counsel for didn't go through.
- ▶ When your good desire goes unfulfilled even though you ask, seek, and knock in faith.
- ▶ Having a nagging thought: "How do I know God exists?"
- ▶ When a child that you have loved since before they were born, not only goes astray, but goes on to beliefs and a lifestyle that are 180 degrees different than yours.
- ▶ Someone is wounded by believers in a church and rejects belief in God as a result.

2

Doubt in the Scripture

- ▶ Multiple Greek words and meanings.
- ▶ **Romans 14:23**, "And he that doubteth is damned if he eat, because he eateth not of faith: for whatsoever is not of faith is sin."
- ▶ **Revelation 21:7-8**, "He that overcometh shall inherit all things; and I will be his God, and he shall be my son. 8 But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death."
- ▶ **Matthew 14:31**, "And immediately Jesus stretched forth his hand, and caught him, and said unto him, **O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt?**" [Peter walking on the water]

3

Understanding Type(s) of Doubt

4

Some Types of Doubt (Fuzzy Categories)

A. Intellectual doubt

1. True seeking with questions
2. Struggle with adequate knowledge
3. Existential doubt – What is the meaning of life?
4. Philosophical skepticism

B. Emotional doubt

1. Dealing with the unknown and questions
2. Feelings of uncertainty
3. Emotional and mental struggle (Depression, OCD, Trauma)

C. Spiritual doubt

1. Difficulty trusting and releasing control to God
2. Disappointment and confusion with God
3. Willful unbelief and unwillingness to submit to God

5

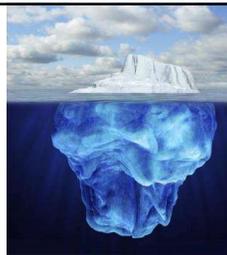
Engage People at the Level of Their Need

- ▶ When someone says the word “doubt,” don’t assume what they mean. Always find out.
 - ▶ Someone in emotional pain having doubts needs to be met with support at the emotional level.
 - ▶ Someone who has specific intellectual doubts needs to be met in that place.
 - ▶ Example of C.S. Lewis in writing The Problem of Pain vs. A Grief Observed
- ▶ Sometimes people ask questions at one level, but have needs at another.

6

Separating Events from Issues

- ▶ There are two layers to most conversations:
 - Events - the topic at hand.
 - Issues - the “under-the-surface” feelings, meanings, and goals.
- ▶ Many conflicts are never solved because the people talking are actually arguing about different hidden issues.
- ▶ It is a loving act (though often a challenge) to work at understanding why another person is reacting to an issue the way he/she is.



Markman, Stanley, & Blumberg Fighting for Your Marriage

7

Volitional Doubt: Cynics and Skeptics

- ▶ Not everyone with doubt is seeking help or is distressed by it.
- ▶ Some individuals will cling to their doubt and are very cynical and skeptical.
 - ▶ There is unwillingness to surrender even when truth is known and has been adequately presented.
 - ▶ No amount of reasoning will lead to improvement.
- ▶ Love them, relate to them, however, there are usually diminishing returns in debate.

8

Faith vs. Doubt vs. Unbelief

9

Faith ↔ Doubt ↔ Unbelief

Quote from Os Guinness's In Two Minds... "explains the difference between doubt and unbelief: Doubt is not the opposite of faith, nor is it the same as unbelief. Doubt is a state of mind in suspension *between* faith and unbelief so that it is neither of them wholly and it is each only partly. This distinction is absolutely vital because it uncovers and deals with the first major misconception of doubt—the idea that in doubting a believer is betraying faith and surrendering to unbelief. No misunderstanding causes more anxiety and brings such bondage to sensitive people in doubt..."

10

Faith ↔ Doubt ↔ Unbelief

The word *unbelief* is usually used of a willful refusal to believe or a deliberate decision to disobey. So, while doubt is a state of suspension between faith and unbelief, unbelief is a state of mind which is closed against God, an attitude of heart which disobeys God as much as it disbelieves the truth... Doubt is not the opposite of faith, unbelief is. Doubt does not necessarily or automatically mean the end of faith, for doubt is *faith in two minds*. What destroys faith is the disobedience that hardens into unbelief. "(1976, 27-30)

11

Pastoral Care

12

Pastoral Care for Doubt: What It Isn't

- ▶ It isn't about "scoring points" against each the other person.
- ▶ Does not involve you becoming a world class apologist.
- ▶ It is not countering every question with the perfect answer.
- ▶ It doesn't involve you having to resolve all of your own doubts before you can be useful to God or others.

13

Pastoral Care

- ▶ Ensure the person you are talking with knows that they have been listen to, cared for, and loved.
- ▶ Be aware of their God concept and God image distortions.
- ▶ We must break the isolation so the person knows they are not alone in their questions and dispel the shame that often accompanies doubt and adds pain and confusion.
- ▶ Determine if the person is wanting to talk, learn, or tell.
- ▶ Help establish grounding in truth
 - ▶ **Romans 10:17**, "So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God."

14

Pastoral Care Cont'd

- ▶ Provide resources: especially true when trying to address commonly asked questions. Most likely, many other people have already asked the same questions.
- ▶ Help the person see that faith involves a choice to trust even when there is doubt or uncertainty.
 - ▶ **Mark 9:23-24**, "*Jesus said unto him, If thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth. And straightway the father of the child cried out, and said with tears, Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief.*"
- ▶ Consider the timing and when to wait to address doubts (e.g., recent bereavement, trauma).
- ▶ Role of counseling: sometimes the addressing depression, anxiety, grief, or trauma is a key feature of healing doubt.
- ▶ Prayer and reliance on the Holy Spirit's work.

15

Doubt, Faith, and Knowledge

16

“Certainty = Faith” and Other Misbeliefs

- ▶ Our faith is what we believe, not what we feel.
- ▶ We must neither vilify nor deify emotions.
- ▶ Seeking emotional confirmation of truth leads to immense suffering.
- ▶ Watch out for the misbeliefs such as:
 - ▶ “Certainty = Faith”
 - ▶ “Uncertainty = Doubt = Danger”
- ▶ **Good Working Definition of Faith:** Faith is trusting God through the uncertainty. See the examples in Hebrews 11.

17

“Walking Faith” is Our Goal

- ▶ **C.S. Lewis Screwtape Letters** - “Be not deceived, Wormwood, our cause is never more in jeopardy than when a human, no longer desiring but still intending to do our Enemy's will, looks round upon a universe in which every trace of Him seems to have vanished, and asks why he has been forsaken, and still obeys.”
- ▶ **Job 23:8-10**, “8 Behold, I go forward, but he is not there; and backward, but I cannot perceive him: 9 On the left hand, where he doth work, but I cannot behold him: he hideth himself on the right hand, that I cannot see him: 10 But he knoweth the way that I take: when he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold.”

18

Doubt and Adequate Knowledge

- ▶ Sometimes people confuse doubt from the feeling that they would like to have more knowledge of something.
- ▶ Adequate understanding vs comprehensive knowledge
 - ▶ Consider driving a car, using a computer, or getting married.

19

Faith and Understanding

- ▶ God invites us to a relationship of faith that involves believing, trusting, clinging, and following.
- ▶ This relationship does not require the feeling of certainty, an emotional sense of calmness, or understanding of the future.
- ▶ We need to understand that God is not asking us to understand Him.
- ▶ **Tension: God can be known AND God is beyond us.**
- ▶ He is not asking us to understand the theological conundrums that do not make sense to finite minds.

20

“God will not hold us responsible to understand the mysteries of election, predestination, and the divine sovereignty. The best and safest way to deal with these truths is to raise our eyes to God and in deepest reverence say, "O Lord, Thou knowest." Those things belong to the deep and mysterious Profound of God's omniscience. Prying into them may make theologians, but it will never make saints.”

-- A. W. Tozer - *The Pursuit of God*

21

What the Church Can Do

22

Nurture Curiosity, Wonder, and Acceptance of Mystery

- ▶ Curiosity and wonder are two aspects of the spiritual life that are often not fully appreciated or nurtured.
- ▶ We like to know things, for sure. However, having an over-reliance on being certain often leads to rigidity.
- ▶ **Tension: We know some things about God for sure AND Other things we don't know for sure.**
- ▶ Trust that the Bible was written just how God wanted it to be. God didn't accidentally forget to explain things.
- ▶ God refuses to be put in a box or reduced to a formula... although repeatedly try!!!

23

“Aslan is a lion- the Lion, the great Lion.”
"Ooh" said Susan. "I'd thought he was a man. Is he-quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion"... "Safe?" said Mr. Beaver ... "Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you.”

— C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*

24

Help The Church Enlarge Their View of God Beyond Our Thoughts

- ▶ **Deuteronomy 29:29**, "The secret things belong unto the Lord our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law."
- ▶ **Isaiah 40:28**, "Hast thou not known? hast thou not heard, that the everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth, fainteth not, neither is weary? there is no searching of his understanding."
- ▶ **Psalms 147:5**, "Great is our Lord, and of great power: his understanding is infinite."
- ▶ **Isaiah 55:8-9**, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts."
- ▶ **Tension:** We must accept that some things about God and life we won't understand AND we must accept we must search, study, and seek to understand God and life.

25

Teach a Realistic and Healthy View of Suffering

- ▶ Suffering, disappointment, and heartache are among the most common reasons people doubt.
- ▶ We must not minimize the cost of Christianity while we talk to people about the benefits.
- ▶ Times of disorientation and confusion are part of life. See the Psalms. Teach Lament.
- ▶ Biographies are key.
 - ▶ Examine suffering and doubt in the life of the people in the OT and NT.
 - ▶ Older/Mature believers need to recount about their times of struggle and share it with younger believers.

26

Open the Door for Discussion of Doubt

- ▶ Make it safe for people to have questions.
- ▶ Encourage people to be OK with saying "I don't know." or say "One possibility might be..."
- ▶ The issues isn't so much whether we have big faith or small faith, but Who is the object of our faith.
 - ▶ Story of two Jewish men putting blood on the doorposts prior to the first Passover.

27

Help Others Learn What They Believe and Why They Believe It

- ▶ Help all generations. Dealing with doubt isn't just a young person's issue.
- ▶ Our world undermines belief in absolute truth and any authority except oneself. We need to both teach truth and inoculate it against lies.
 - ▶ Story "Ted, I don't think you know what you believe."

28

Remember Agape Love Goes the Distance

- ▶ For some individuals, doubt is a transient and mild issue. For others, it is life dominating and long term.
- ▶ We must be willing to walk alongside individuals for the “long-haul.”
- ▶ Psalm 36:5, *“Thy mercy, O LORD, is in [extends to] the heavens; and thy faithfulness reacheth unto the clouds.”*

29

Resources

30

Resources

- ▶ **Dealing with Doubt Breaking Bread Podcast** - Brian Sutter & John Reinhard
 - ▶ www.accounseling.org/dealingwithdoubt
- ▶ **Doubt and the Believer** - Brian Sutter
 - ▶ www.accounseling.org/doubt
- ▶ **Lament: Bringing Our Emotional Pain to God**
 - ▶ www.accounseling.org/lament-podcast-episode - Ted Witzig Jr.
- ▶ **Done, D. (2019). When faith fails: Finding God in the shadow of doubt. Thomas Nelson.**
 - ▶ I'm not recommending this as a perfect book to cast out all doubts. Rather, I appreciate the author's approach to sharing his personal journey through doubt in a relatable and supportive manner. It does a lot to destigmatize doubt and to walk through it in a healthy manner.

31