

How can I be sure?

And other questions about
doubt, assurance and the Bible



John Stevens

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The problem of doubt



I became a Christian in 1988 while I was a law student. I had grown up in a non-Christian family, and started university as a convinced atheist. I became a Christian through the witness of a number of friends from my course, who shared the good news about Jesus with me and invited me to numerous evangelistic meetings. I resisted God's call on my life for more than a year, but finally trusted in Christ at the beginning of my final year.

Given that I had already had to overcome my scepticism and unbelief to become a Christian, I started out with a confident faith in Jesus. I was conscious of growing in faith and enjoying a new relationship with God. However, over the years I found that I had to face new doubts. I continued to struggle with sin and was frustrated by my failures. Sometimes God felt distant and I

wondered whether my relationship with him was real. I discovered new theological and philosophical challenges to my faith and the truthfulness of the Bible. I felt the frustrations of seeing little fruit from my ministry and the disappointments of being let down by church and other Christians.

Five years after I had become a Christian, my father died from lung cancer without ever, to my knowledge, professing faith in Christ. Watching him die painfully and slowly inevitably made me question my faith in a new way. How could a God of love allow such a slow, painful and lingering death? Was it really possible to believe in a bodily resurrection? Would a loving God really send those who had rejected Jesus to eternal punishment in Hell for ever? I had faced some of these questions intellectually, and knew what the Bible said, but my experience meant that I now faced them in a different way. They were no longer abstract questions of moral philosophy but bound up with the loss of someone I had loved. It took me several years to recover a confident and assured faith after the anguish of this time.

I have now been involved in church leadership for almost twenty years. During that time I have had the privilege of ministering to all different kinds of people, at all stages of life. I have spent time with many who have struggled with doubts, or a lack of assurance about their salvation. Some have struggled with intense and long-lasting doubt and they have endured a real fight to keep their faith. Whether a period of doubt is short or long, it usually robs Christians of their joy, peace and delight in God, and prevents them serving him whole-

heartedly and sacrificially. It turns them inwards as they search their hearts and consciences for signs of real faith, and may cause them paralysing fear as to whether they are believers at all.

Doubt is one of the hidden struggles that many Christians face. Christians know that they are meant to be people of “faith”, and so they find it hard to admit that they are struggling with doubt. You may fear that other Christians will respect you less, stop you from serving in ministry, or even withdraw their friendship. However, it is vital that we are honest about the problem, so that we can find help and recover a joyful and confident faith.

You may be reading this because you are struggling with doubt yourself, or because you know others who are struggling. My prayer is that you will be reassured to discover that doubt is a common experience for God’s people, and that you will be helped to grow stronger in your faith.

There is no single reason why Christians experience doubt. The following fictional cases, drawn from my pastoral experiences, show how some Christians have come to doubt.

Aidan

Aidan is a committed Christian in his twenties. He has long struggled with an addiction to internet pornography. Much of the time he is able to resist his desire, but then he is gripped by an irresistible urge to download again. This often happens when he is feeling low, lonely or unhappy. These repeated failures make him feel that he cannot really be a true believer. How can he be for-

given and indwelt by the Holy Spirit when he keeps failing and falling in this way?

Barbara

Barbara is a retired missionary who spent many years serving the Lord in South America. Shortly after she arrived back, she was diagnosed with aggressive breast cancer. Many friends around the world have been praying for her to be healed, but these prayers have not been answered. She is questioning whether there can be a good and loving God if he has allowed her to become ill like this after a lifetime of faithful service.

Catherine

Catherine is in her early thirties. She became a Christian through an Alpha course. She has struggled with depression and is resentful that she is still single. Recently a new Muslim colleague joined her team at work. She finds him attractive and he has asked her out on a date. Although he attends Mosque regularly, he says that he thinks that all religions are the same. She has started to wonder whether it can be really true that Jesus is the only way to God.

Dan

Dan cannot remember a time when he did not believe in Jesus. His family taught him from an early age that the Bible is true and trustworthy. He is now studying engineering at university and has become good friends with a theology student. This friend has told him that the Bible is full of errors and contradictions, and has

lent him some books. He is beginning to wonder if he can really trust the Bible and keep believing in Jesus.

Ellie

Ellie became a Christian on a summer camp with her best friend from school. She is now the president of the Christian Union at her university. Her older brother recently came out as gay. He has found a partner and they are planning to marry. Ellie can see that her brother loves his partner very much, and that he is happier in this relationship than he has ever been. She is finding it hard to believe in a God who would condemn her brother's relationship. How can her faith be true if this is what it requires?

Femi

Femi is from a Nigerian family and grew up in a large Pentecostal church. He became a Christian after a dramatic conversion experience which included an overpowering sense of the love and presence of God, and speaking in tongues. However, he has not felt close to God for the past few months, and he is beginning to wonder whether his conversion was ever real. He has stopped going to church because he doesn't seem to "get" anything out of it.

Graham

Graham has been a Christian for more than twenty years. He has never experienced any significant periods when he has questioned his faith, but he is troubled that he occasionally finds himself wondering, for no



apparent reason, whether what he believes can really be true, especially when the vast majority of other people aren't Christians. These times pass quickly as he reminds himself of the facts of the gospel, but he can't help but wonder if there is something fundamentally wrong with his faith.

Jennifer

Jennifer grew up in a strong Christian family. She cannot remember a time that she did not believe in Jesus and pray to him. She is very active in her local church. She doesn't question the truth of the Christian faith, but deep down she is anxious about whether she is really a Christian herself. She hasn't had a dramatic conversion experience like some of her friends, and wouldn't say that she had ever had any deep sense of conviction of sin or passionate delight in her salvation. Most of the time she is happy and content, but she wonders if she really has true spiritual life.

The good news is that even if Christians and churches tend not to be open and honest about doubt, the Bible faces the problem of doubt head on. It admits that doubt will be a problem for all of God's people for some of the time, and for some of God's people for much of the time.

The most famous doubter in the Bible is the apostle Thomas. John's Gospel tells how Thomas first refused to believe that Jesus had really risen, even though he had appeared to the other disciples. Thomas told them: "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my

finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe” (John 20 v 25). Jesus appeared again a week later, only this time Thomas was with the other disciples. When he saw Jesus he proclaimed: “My Lord and my God!” (John 20 v 28).

Many who struggle with doubt hunger for an experience like this. But Jesus doesn’t promise it—quite the opposite. He has spoken to us through his word, and this is sufficient. When Thomas finally believed, Jesus did not commend him for his faith, but told him:


Because you have seen me, you have believed;
blessed are those who have not seen and yet have
believed. *John 20 v 29*

Jesus does not promise us that we will “see” in this life. We are called to “live by faith” in the promise of his word, not by sight. The word we have in the Bible is completely sufficient to meet the challenge of doubts. In the rest of this book we will listen to what God has to say to us in the Scriptures so that we can have confident faith in the Lord Jesus.

**“The art of doubting is easy, for it is an
ability that is born with us.”**

Martin Luther

What is doubt?

 **W**hat do we mean by doubt? Doubt is a word that has a wide range of meanings. The Bible rarely uses the term, although it speaks much about faith and belief. We use “doubt” to describe a number of different feelings of uncertainty, not all of which are equally serious spiritual problems.

Doubt as uncertainty about the future

At the most basic level we use “doubt” to mean the opposite of “certainty”. If asked whether it is going to rain today, someone might reply: “I doubt it”. Such doubt is not always a bad thing. I am right to doubt my child’s promise that she won’t go near the cliff edge, or the con-man’s claim that he will double my money. And I ought to doubt that an England team will win any international sporting competition.

Here “doubt” describes a lack of certainty about an

unpredictable outcome, and expresses our judgement that a particular possibility is unlikely. Christians may often suffer from doubt of this kind, as for example where they “doubt” that their faith would cope if they were to be diagnosed with a terminal disease, or if they faced painful persecution. Such “doubt” may cause them to question the reality of their faith in the present.

Doubt as uncertainty about something you believe to be true

We also use “doubt” to describe the process of questioning things we believe to be true. A scientist who is convinced that evolution is a true theory may begin to “doubt” her belief if new data is discovered that doesn’t seem to fit the theory. While she hasn’t yet abandoned her belief in evolution—because it still seems the most compelling explanation—she has some new questions that might cause her to rethink.

Or the members of a jury might be utterly convinced that the defendant is guilty after they have heard the prosecution case, but they begin to wonder if the case is so clear cut when they start to hear the defence witnesses. In both cases doubt has been prompted by new information that causes the person to re-evaluate their existing beliefs. In the end they will either reinforce their original belief and hold it more strongly, or have to abandon it.

Doubting in this sense is more akin to questioning our beliefs. It is a process that leads us to change our minds, opinions and convictions. The mere fact that we might have questions about what we believe does not

mean that we have ceased to believe. Christians regularly experience doubts like this. They are essential for us to grow and mature. When I was first a Christian, for example, I believed that the children of Christians should be baptised. Over a period of time I began to “doubt” that infant baptism was supported by the Bible, until eventually I became convinced that it wasn’t, although I respect the views of Christians who come to a different conclusion. This is just one example where my beliefs and practices have been changed and developed, which began with some element of doubt.

Doubt as lack of assurance

It is important to differentiate such questioning “doubt” from unbelief. Christians may use different language to try to make this distinction. A person may believe that the Christian faith is objectively true, and yet doubt whether they are truly a Christian. Their uncertainty that they are a true believer is a problem of “assurance”. The different term helps make clear that this is not the same problem as unbelief. The spiritual remedy for the problem will therefore also be different.

Doubt as unbelief

Finally we sometimes use “doubt” to mean “unbelief”. An atheist “doubts” that there is a God. It is ironic that this kind of “doubt” is actually a kind of certainty. Such “doubt” will seem especially incongruous where a person belongs to a group that requires belief in a specific position; for example if a politician belonging to the Scottish Nationalist Party were to campaign

against independence because they believe in the maintenance of the United Kingdom. We might use the term “doubt” to describe a church leader who does not believe that Jesus rose from the dead, or of a social church-goer who recites the creed but does not believe what they are saying.

Christians may sometimes be afflicted by limited unbelief. People who profess to be Christians may not believe a particular promise of God, or deny that a specific command of God is true and right. Because the Bible warns against the danger of unbelief it is important to know what beliefs are essential to salvation. It is not essential, for example, to believe that baptism can *only* be by immersion, but *it is essential* to believe that Jesus is fully God.

Doubt is inevitable for Christians

Recognising the broad range of ways in which we use the term “doubt” can be helpful because Christians will inevitably experience “doubt” in at least some of these senses. At times they may question something they believe. This will be good if it leads them to a deeper confidence in the truths of the faith, or to a new conviction which more accurately reflects what God has said in his word. However, we cannot be complacent about our doubts because the Bible warns strongly against the danger of “unbelief.”

The heroes of the faith experienced doubt

Many Christians feel a crushing burden of failure and guilt when they experience doubts. This may be com-

pounded because they never hear other Christians admitting to the doubts they experience, and because they hear preachers constantly stressing the importance of faith. They know the stories of great heroes, such as David and Daniel, who trusted God in extraordinary circumstances, and they feel inadequate by comparison.

However, when we read the Bible carefully, we discover that virtually all of God's heroes experienced times of doubt. The greatest chapter on faith is Hebrews 11, which lists the heroes of faith from the Old Testament, and urges us to follow their example. Many of these "heroes" experienced doubt. At times Abraham, the supreme model of faith, doubted that God would keep his promises to him. He twice passed his wife off as his sister because he feared for his life. Even after God had promised him a son, he concocted a plan with his infertile wife to have a child by her slave. His ultimate faith and perseverance were forged through a battle with doubt. The same is true of Moses, Gideon, David, Job and Elijah.

We find the same story in the New Testament. Even when Jesus was with them, the disciples struggled with doubt. Peter doubted that Jesus had to go to Jerusalem to be crucified (Matthew 16 v 22). Thomas famously doubted that Jesus had risen from the dead, but he was not alone. Luke 24 v 38-39 tells us that *all* the disciples found it hard to believe:

[Jesus] said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? Look at my

hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones.”

And even after the Holy Spirit had been given at Pentecost, he continued to doubt. Peter doubted when Jesus commanded him to go and preach the gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 10 v 9-23). The New Testament letters repeatedly call their readers to have faith in God. They were written to address their doubts about Jesus and the faith, often prompted by false teachers. James urges believers not to doubt but to pray with faith (James 1 v 6), while Jude commanded the church to be “merciful to those who doubt” (Jude v 22).

The universal Christian experience of struggling with doubt should not surprise us, because we live in a fallen world that has been subjected to darkness and spiritual blindness from the moment that Adam and Eve rebelled in the Garden of Eden. Since then, God’s people have been in a spiritual battle for the truth in a world of unbelief. Faith ought to be the real surprise. True faith that triumphs over unbelief is always a miracle of God.

So if you are reading this book because you are struggling with a problem of doubt at the moment, *be encouraged!* The fact that you doubt does not mean that you can’t be a Christian. “Doubt” is not the same as “unbelief”. Many of the heroes of the Bible, and of church history, have struggled with doubt at some time, as do many of the Christians you know today.

However, you can’t afford to ignore your doubt, treating it complacently or just hoping that it will go away. You must deal with it so that it does not develop

into unbelief, and use it as an opportunity to develop a more confident, resilient and mature faith.