

# Dealing with Doubt

LEADERS & STAFF



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

# Practical Ministry Skills: Dealing with Doubt

Contents .....	PAGE
Leader's Guide .....	2
<b>Understanding Doubt</b>	
THE DOUBTER'S ROAD <i>by Jason Boyett</i> .....	3
WHAT DOUBT IS—AND ISN'T <i>by Alister McGrath</i> .....	5
WHEN LIFE ISN'T FAIR <i>by Mark Buchanan</i> .....	7
EMBRACING THE QUESTIONS <i>Interview with Jason Boyett</i> .....	8
<b>Doubt and Ministry</b>	
GOD AMONG THE DOUBTS <i>by Roger Barrier</i> .....	10
HOPE FOR THE DOUBTING LEADER <i>by Ben Patterson</i> .....	13
STRATEGIES FOR FENDING OFF DOUBT <i>by Alister McGrath</i> .....	16
<b>Resources</b>	
FURTHER EXPLORATION .....	18

**DEALING WITH DOUBT****Leader's Guide**

*How to use "Practical Ministry Skills" by BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS in your regularly scheduled meetings.*

*Welcome to BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS: Your Complete Guide to Leadership Training. You've purchased an innovative resource that will help you develop leaders who can think strategically and biblically about the church. Selected by the editors of Christianity Today International, the material comes from respected thinkers and church leaders.*

"Practical Ministry Skills" is completely flexible and designed for easy use. Each theme focuses on a practical area of church ministry and comprises brief handouts on specific aspects of that ministry. The handouts give a succinct and practical overview of the issues most relevant to your goals. You may use them at the beginning of a meeting to help launch a discussion, or you may hand them out as brief primers for someone new to a particular ministry.

This special theme on **Dealing with Doubt** is designed to help you cope with anything from nagging questions about God to extended crisis of faith. It will also prepare you to minister even as you grapple with your doubts. You may either use these handouts for personal edification or for a group training session. Or you may choose to provide copies to the church board, staff members, or those involved with specific ministry teams at your church. Simply print the handouts you need and use them as necessary.

For an introduction to this thorny topic, read the "The Doubter's Road" (pp. 3-4) by Jason Boyett and "What Doubt Is—and Isn't" (pp.5-6) by scholar Alister McGrath. To read one pastor's lifelong struggle with doubt, including through his ministry, read "God Among the Doubts" (pp. 10-12). You'll also read an interview with Jason Boyett, which addresses, among several topics, how transparent church leaders should be with their congregants about personal battles with doubt (pp. 8-9). Read Mark Buchanan's reflection on believing in a good God even when life seems unfair (p. 7). When it's not God you doubt—but yourself and your ability to lead decisively—you'll find "Hope for the Doubting Leader" helpful (pp. 13-15). For practical steps to cope with your questions, read "Strategies for Fending Off Doubt" by Alister McGrath (pp. 16-17).

We hope this training tool will encourage you by showing you that you are not alone in this struggle. Many godly Christian leaders in the Bible and in church history have done battle with doubt. It's not a disqualification for service. We hope that these stories and teachings will inspire you to continue serving God powerfully, even as you work through uncertainty and doubt. And ultimately, we hope that your congregation, your ministry, and you will be blessed as you see God working through your ministry.

Need more material, or something on a specific topic? See our website at [www.BuildingChurchLeaders.com](http://www.BuildingChurchLeaders.com).

To contact the editors:

E-mail [BCL@christianitytoday.com](mailto:BCL@christianitytoday.com)

Mail BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS, Christianity Today International  
465 Gundersen Drive, Carol Stream, IL 60188

**DEALING WITH DOUBT****The Doubter's Road**

*For many Christians, faith is far from an easy journey.*

Matthew 25:21

I am a Christian. I have been a Christian for most of my life. But there are times—a growing number of times, to be honest—where I'm not entirely sure I believe in God.

There. I said it.

So now you know, and we can both relax and talk about it. Confessing the presence of spiritual uncertainty in my life is a relief. I can breathe easier now because I don't have to pretend. I don't have to hide my conflicted feelings when we talk about Jesus and the Bible. I don't have to tiptoe around the word most of us hesitate to use in church or around Christian friends because it freaks us out so much.

**Not a Smooth Path**

If you identify with me, maybe we're on the same road and can walk together. It's not the straight, easy road to faith. It's no smooth interstate highway with well-lit rest stops and clean restrooms and lots of gas stations. It's not the road where the driving comes with a soundtrack—a crisp satellite radio connection to the Almighty.

Nope, ours is the doubter's road. It's a winding back road that never seems to get anywhere fast enough. This road is poorly lit, cratered with potholes, and far from flat. Every once in awhile it steers up into the mountains, where the air is fresh and the views are spectacular. But mostly it unwinds its graveled way through valleys, across deserts, and past sketchy small towns.

You know what it's like. You've doubted in the past. Maybe you're wracked with uncertainty right now. Or maybe you're preparing for the future. You realize that your faith—while active and vigorous today—is nevertheless fragile. If something terrible happens, will your faith survive? Will you cling to Jesus when your headlights barely brighten the road ahead and all you hear is static?

**Fellow Travelers**

I've had the opportunity to speak about my journey of doubt at colleges and churches and in small groups, and I'm always surprised at the number of people for whom the topic is deeply resonant. "Thank you for being honest about this stuff," people say. They're usually whispering, and then lean in like they're about to tell me a secret. "Actually I feel the same way you do. Almost all the time. It's good to know I'm not alone."

Although the number of open skeptics in our culture is growing, doubt is verboten among most Christians. Nearly all of us struggle with doubt, but few are willing to own it—even though its thread is woven throughout the biblical narrative. Abraham dealt with God's absence. Sarah laughed at God's slowness to fulfill his promises. Job struggled to understand God's actions. David expressed his doubt in poetry: "How long, O Lord?" he asks in Psalm 13. "Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?" If we're honest, we identify with these biblical characters—sometimes God seems pretty distant. But we're not alone, and that's comforting.

**Unresolved but Hopeful**

Living with doubts is difficult, but the alternative is worse: believe too little or don't believe anything at all. That might make life easier, but that's not the kind of existence I want. I'd rather deal with the uncertainty of being too open than suffer through the monotony of a closed-up life. I'd rather risk seeing my hopes get dashed than to choose no hope at all. I'd rather spend life looking for evidence of God—even if finding it is a struggle—than to conclude, before starting, that there's nothing to see. I'd rather have a faith that makes me ask too many questions than a faith in which the questions have easy answers (or worse, a religion where questions are forbidden).

I suspect my travels on the doubter's road haven't been entirely my choice. My skeptical personality seems predisposed to doubt. I'm sure the religious environment of my childhood contributed to my uncertainty, despite the well-meaning people behind it. My passion for history and theology are also culprits. But I've become accustomed to this road. Its twists and turns no longer seem so surprising or its potholes so jarring. On the doubter's road, I'm driving under the belief that it leads me somewhere. Somewhere holy. Somewhere shot through with grace. Somewhere near my eternal home, where I'll hear the words, "Well done, good and

**DEALING WITH DOUBT**

faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things... Come and share your master's happiness!" (Matthew 25:21).

— JASON BOYETT; adapted from *O Me of Little Faith* by Jason Boyett. © 2010 by Zondervan. Used by permission of Zondervan. [www.zondervan.com](http://www.zondervan.com).

**Discuss**

1. Do you consider yourself a traveler on the doubter's road? Why are Christians reluctant to speak openly about this issue?
2. Can you think of a time when you shared your struggle with someone else? How did they react?
3. Do you consider exploring your doubts a virtue or a vice? What are some healthy and unhealthy ways to investigate your doubts?

**DEALING WITH DOUBT****What Doubt Is—and Isn't***Doubt isn't always the enemy of faith.*

Proverbs 3:5-8

Many Christians refuse to even speak about their doubts. Perhaps they think it is improper to own up to them, or they are afraid that they will look stupid if they do. Maybe they are worried that their pride or self-esteem would suffer. Yet one of the reasons why so many Christians have difficulty coping with doubt is that they confuse it with two quite separate ideas, which at first seem similar but are actually rather different.

**Doubt Clarified**

In the first place, doubt is not skepticism—the decision to doubt everything deliberately, as a matter of principle.

Second, doubt is not unbelief—the decision not to have faith in God. Unbelief is an act of will, rather than a difficulty in understanding. Sometimes we feel as if there is an “old Adam” within us, trying to sabotage our faith. We need help to overcome our old nature and its unbelieving outlook.

Doubt often means asking questions or voicing uncertainties from the standpoint of faith. You believe—but you have difficulties with that faith, or are worried about it in some way. Faith and doubt aren't mutually exclusive—but faith and unbelief are.

Doubt is probably a permanent feature of the Christian life. It's like a spiritual growing pain. Sometimes it recedes into the background; at other times it comes to the forefront, making its presence felt with a vengeance. It is helpful to think of doubt as a symptom of our human frailty, of our reluctance to trust God. Doubt, then, needs to be seen in its proper context—that of our struggle against sin. It is an integral part of the process of growing in faith and encountering resistance from old natures as we do so.

**Human Frailty and Limitations**

Yet there is more to it than this. It is not entirely correct to describe doubt as simply a product of human sinfulness. It is also a reflection of human frailty. We are human beings, and quite frankly, this means that we operate under limits. There are many things that we cannot do and many things that we cannot see—simply because we are human, not divine. We're like grasshoppers, trying to make sense of a vast universe (Isaiah 40:22). If we were left to find out about God using our own limited resources, we wouldn't get very far. Fortunately God comes to our aid by making himself known.

God is bigger than we think, and our minds struggle even to begin to wrestle with him. Augustine wrote of the inability of the mind to comprehend God fully: If you can comprehend it, he remarked, it's not God. To comprehend is to grasp something in its entirety. But what if it is too great, too deep, for us to do this? What if we are confronted with the deepest of oceans, and we can only skim its surface? If we cannot see something in its totality, we are not going to be able to make complete sense of it.

There are limits placed on the human ability to grasp the things of God. And because we can't fully grasp something, we sometimes doubt that it is true. We misinterpret our inability to understand something as a sign that it is not true, or not real. In reality, the situation is very different. We are confronted with many things in the world—including the Christian gospel—that are just too big for our minds to embrace. And we have to learn to live with that tension—not doubting, but trusting.

**Controlling Expectations**

Doubt arises partly on account of our unrealistic expectations about certainty. We think that we ought to be able to prove with absolute certainty that certain things are true—for example, that God exists. But being prepared to accept our limitations is an essential part of growing in faith.

It is only natural that we should want to see and know more. But that's overlooking our limitations. It's like saying, “Because I can't see the stars in the daylight, they're not really there.” That's confusing our perception of the situation with the reality of that situation. The way we see things isn't necessarily the way things really are.

Doubt often reflects a sense of unease about the way in which experience, reason, feeling and faith relate. Sometimes they seem to be out of step with each other. So which do we believe? Which is right? The central

**DEALING WITH DOUBT**

insight here is that our frailty and weakness prevent us from fully comprehending the way in which these relate to each other. The good news is that God does not leave us at the mercy of our frailty. John Calvin set out a principle that is helpful here: “God accommodates himself to our weakness.” In other words, God knows our limitations and adapts himself accordingly. We cannot see the full picture, so God presents us with a reliable guide to its contents, hitting the high points. No more is possible, given the limitations placed on us. Of course we have difficulties in trying to understand God and the world—but this doesn’t mean that our faith is misplaced!

—ALISTER MCGRATH, adapted from *Doubling* (InterVarsity Press, 2007). Used by permission.

**Discuss**

1. What are some common misperceptions about doubt? How can these be corrected?
2. Do you have unrealistic expectations about certainty? In what ways might such expectations set you up for frustration and doubt?
3. Is doubt something that can be conquered completely? Or do you see it as a permanent feature of the Christian life?

**DEALING WITH DOUBT****When Life Isn't Fair**

*Innocent and good people suffer. What kind of God would allow that?*

Isaiah 55:8–9; Joel 2:25–27

*A pastor reflects on life's injustices—and how to face them with a Bible-based faith.*

**An Unjust World (It's Not an Illusion)**

Life is unfair. Sometimes the innocent are murdered, and the murderer is protected. Situations like these give rise to difficult questions: What is right in a world where little children die and genocidal despots live in luxury? Where hard-working men go bankrupt and swindlers go on swindling? Where all the wrong people, it seems, suffer?

In Genesis 4, Abel experienced injustice when he was murdered. How could this happen? He, according to Hebrews 11, was the one who pleased God. He had faith; Cain didn't. In fact, how is it that so many models of faith in Hebrews 11 were the victims of murder?

Surely the saints of Hebrews 11 carried within themselves a keen sense of life's unfairness. "Some faced jeers and flogging... others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned. They were sawed in two. They were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted, mistreated. ...They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground" (Hebrews 11:36–39).

Abel did the right thing. God loved Abel. God accepted Abel. God showed favor to Abel. But that favor was expressed only in accepting Abel's gift. It was not expressed in protection. In fact, God provides far more protection to Cain than he ever did to Abel. He marked Cain to keep at bay the avengers. Aren't things supposed to go well for those who please the Lord?

**An Unsafe God (Is What We Want)**

God's definition of life going well is unique, distinct. His definition of wellness is not about health or finances. It's not even about protection. It's not at all about life being fair.

It's about acceptance. It's about God accepting us as his own. It's not about being spared from untimely or difficult death. It's about being spared the "second death"—the death of unbridgeable separation, the death that is oblivion and torment and unending aloneness.

Because of Jesus Christ, we have received God's *unmerited* favor. God doesn't make the injustices of life vanish. He redeems them—their unfairness, their brokenness, their disease and death—and he gives us back sevenfold all the years the locusts have eaten.

Ultimately, we are citizens of heaven, and we eagerly await a Savior from there. But meanwhile, we walk by faith and not by sight. Meanwhile those who walk by faith discover that life rarely gets easier. It often gets harder. Safe? Who said God was safe? Fair? Who said God was fair? The Bible doesn't.

—MARK BUCHANAN, © 2007 Christianity Today International/[BuildingChurchLeaders.com](http://BuildingChurchLeaders.com)

**Reflect**

1. How can our church more faithfully teach that God's acceptance does not necessarily grant a life free from evil?
2. What are some times in our church that leaders have needed to step into difficult, unfair situations and offer hope?
3. How will acknowledging the unfairness of life strengthen our church?



## DEALING WITH DOUBT

**Embracing the Questions***Interview with Jason Boyett*

Hebrews 11:1

*Jason Boyett writes extensively about the topic of doubt. He is the author of several books, including O Me of Little Faith, and Pocket Guide to the Afterlife. A Beliefnet blogger at [omeoflittlefaith.com](http://omeoflittlefaith.com), he has contributed to Salon, the Daily Beast, Paste, and a variety of other publications.*

**You're very open about your doubts. Do you find that being that open diminishes or amplifies doubt?**  
Transparency is always helpful. I'm not sure if it increases or decreases doubt. I've found that talking about my doubts helps psychologically and spiritually. On the other hand, it can open up the door and make you more likely to at least entertain them, so being open definitely doesn't make it all better. There is a risk in verbalizing and exploring your doubts. But ultimately I think it's far better to acknowledge the questions and be honest about them.

**I've talked to a lot of young people who have walked away from the faith because they were shut down when they expressed doubts at home or in church. What can the church do differently when young people air their misgivings about faith?**

We need to stop treating doubt as if it's the first step toward losing your faith. That's an idea that needs to be repudiated. Every person is going to get to the place where they start having questions. And if upon asking those questions they are shut down or made to feel like they're being a bad Christian for doing that, one of two things will happen. Either they'll just internalize those questions and fake it, which might make it easier socially, but it's not healthy from a spiritual perspective. Or they will get hurt and feel out of place at church, which often sets them on the road away from the church.

We need to let young people know that doubt is something they can deal with, that everyone deals with it, and that it's okay for a Christian to have doubts. If doubt isn't acknowledged, and presented as something that they can receive grace through, it's going to be incredibly detrimental to their faith in the long run.

**What would you say to church leaders who might struggle with doubt but can't be as open?**

It's easy for me to be completely honest about my doubts. I usually speak at a place once and then leave. But for a pastor it's a different story. And if a pastor is too open, it can be harmful. If a pastor is constantly questioning his faith or communicating uncertainty, that can be problematic for a congregation. So obviously they can't be as open as someone in the pew.

But still, they shouldn't pretend as if they never have doubts or questions. A lack of transparency is equally damaging. There has to be a balance. You shouldn't hide the fact that you have questions, but at the same time you don't want to give the impression that you don't have solid convictions. My advice to church leaders would be to get a core group of friends with whom they can be as transparent as possible about the struggles that they are dealing with. Publicly, they need to be vulnerable and certainly not pretend that they have all the answers. But they need to be deliberate in the topics they approach, realizing the impact it might have on others. Not everyone has the same spiritual maturity to handle the same questions. As a pastor, that total certitude is off-putting, especially for a younger generation.

**You use a lot of humor in your writing. What role does humor play for you in dealing with this issue? To many, humor and doubt seem like a strange combination.**

Humor plays a couple of roles for me. For one, I'll admit that it's a defense mechanism. If I can make a joke about something, it sort of softens the blow. So often humor is poking fun at someone else and having fun at their expense, and I certainly don't want to do that. But I'm fine with self-deprecation—and I think that helps readers identify with me. I hope it comes across as humility rather than just snark.

**What about the idea that doubting is a product of ignorance? If Christian faith is true, can't you simply learn your way out of doubt?**

At the risk of sounding overly confident, I would say that's exactly backwards. Usually the more you learn, the more questions and uncertainties arise. I've had people tell me that the first time they started to doubt was when they took an apologetics class, and suddenly they were exposed to some critiques of their faith they'd

## DEALING WITH DOUBT

never even thought of. The more you learn about the history of Christian faith, the more complicated it gets and the more you're forced to sort through. Learning more tends to raise new questions. When you're aware of the options, it opens room for more doubt. In our society we now know more about all the options out there.

### How do different temperaments or personality types relate to this issue?

I do believe there are certain temperaments that are predisposed to doubt. Of course, it's not just genetics. It could be upbringing and other experiences in life. Certain people are more prone to question things, to contemplate things a bit more. There are some people that just have an anti-authoritarian bent. They're always going to be interested in challenging things and considering alternatives. Then there are others that take things at face value. I'm not trying to label them negatively. In many ways, I find that simplicity of thought very admirable. I know some people who have just never thought to ask some of the questions that have plagued me for years. So personality style factors into this issue, definitely. That's one of the reasons I think it's so dangerous to tell people that they should not doubt or that they should not ask questions. It's not like I decided at the age of 16 that I would start to question my faith. It happened very naturally. It wasn't even something I decided to do. A lot of us are just psychologically built that way.

### You have struggled with doubt a lot. What, in the final analysis, is the reason you have retained your relationship with God?

I think there are a couple of things. I won't deny that one of them is cultural. I come from a family of believing and practicing Christians, on both sides. To just abandon that would be devastating, for everyone. Since my faith is so much a part of my family and my life, leaving it would be like cutting off a leg. I'd still be able to function, but I would lose something that's extremely significant to my life.

On the spiritual and intellectual side of things, I am committed to the ideals of Christianity. Christianity speaks to me more than any other religion, even though I'm a student of world religions. I think if you just took the person of Jesus and talked to the leaders of different world religions, and asked them to come up with someone who best exemplifies the highest virtues, we would have a difficult time coming up with anyone better than Jesus. If you just look at his life and teachings, and all the surprising things he did, he was amazing. He affects people. So I'm committed to the person of Jesus and to walking in the way he taught. I've found grace to be something so revolutionary that I'd stake my life on it.

Then there's the idea of hope. I can't prove to you that God exists, at least in a way that will be completely satisfactory. But I hope that Jesus is who he said he was. I hope that there's something meaningful to the universe, that it's not some cold place ruled by chance and the laws of physics. That hope, in many ways, is the essence of my faith. And even if I'm not always sure that it's all true, I'm living as if it is. Sometimes that's the only faith I have, but that's enough to keep me tied to the faith and to keep me following Jesus.

© 2011 Christianity Today International/[BuildingChurchLeaders.com](http://BuildingChurchLeaders.com)

## Discuss

1. What is the central reason your faith survives doubt?
2. Do you feel like your personality predisposes you to doubt more than others? If so, do you consider that a gift or a burden?
3. Does humor play a role in your attempts to deal with doubt? Should it?

**DEALING WITH DOUBT****God Among the Doubts***It's possible to lead well, even as you grapple with doubt.*

Hebrews 6:11

The room full of ministers hushed when I asked, "Is there anyone here who has never once doubted the reality and truth of Christianity?"

One minister raised his hand.

"Do you mean to tell me that you have never once," I pressed, "in all of your life, had at least one small doubt that Christianity might not be true?"

"That's right," he replied. "I have never had a single doubt—not one."

I thought to myself that he was either a liar or a little daft but thought better of verbalizing my thoughts. I gave some innocuous response and continued leading the prayer time. Later, as I reflected on his remark, I considered that a third option probably existed. Perhaps it was possible for someone to have such simple, childlike faith that doubts never occurred. I would not know. I am not one of those persons.

**Childhood Faith Challenged**

Once upon a time it was. I became a Christian with childlike faith at the age of seven. Nary a doubt entered my mind. My struggles commenced in High School when I read the opening chapters of Genesis. I suppose I had never before read Genesis carefully in the King James Version. My quandary began that night in bed when I realized God had not created the sun until day four. It bothered me that God made light and darkness on day one and separated the sky from the waters on day two and created dry land and vegetation on day three—but did not get around to the sun, moon, and the stars until day four. How could the earth have light before it had a sun?

The next night I discovered a direct contradiction: Moses declared in Genesis 2 that no shrub existed and no plant had sprung up when God formed man out of dust and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life. Did Moses forget what he had just written? In chapter 1 he said that plants were created three days before man. In chapter 2, he emphatically declared that no plants existed when God scooped up dust to fashion a body for man. *What gives?* I thought.

Since my childhood faith was strong, it did not take much to settle my high school musings. Alfred Rehwinkel's *The Flood* brought comfort that brilliant men had figured out explanations for all sorts of complex interfaces between the Bible and science.

I could live off their faith.

**Disillusioning Discoveries**

My faith held strong through college and into my early pastoral career. Then, while riding a bus on a high school mission tour from Arizona to Oregon, I read *The Red Limit* by Timothy Ferris. This astronomical survey of the universe from the Big Bang to the present was mind-boggling. I learned that during the first three minutes after Creation, hundreds of subatomic particles came into being, including protons, neutrons, and electrons, which coalesced into hydrogen, helium, and a few lithium nuclei. After three minutes, not enough heat energy remained to fuse any heavier elements.

Ferris demonstrated how gravity coalesced large clouds of hydrogen and helium gas over long periods of time for the making of stars and galaxies. In short, Ferris's intricate explanation of how every element heavier than helium is produced either during nuclear fusion inside a star or an explosion during the star's demise had

## DEALING WITH DOUBT

dramatic implications! The idea that the "dust of the earth" used by God to create Adam was cooked up inside an exploded star somewhere out in the universe conflicted dramatically with my youthful understanding that one day, about six thousand years ago, God created the heavens and the earth.

The barren desert landscape outside the bus window just south of Las Vegas looked much like the inside of my heart. The more I read, the less I believed in a God who was big enough to oversee the whole universe. Maybe God really was a created figment of man's hope-filled imagination. If he did exist, how could he be everywhere all the time in a universe so immense? Earth was not the center of anything. How could he have time for us? How could man be made of star dust?

My original doubts flooded back with a vengeance.

When we returned home, I decided to squelch my uncertainties and follow Asaph's model in Psalm 73 for handling doubts. The poet almost lost his faith when he contemplated the apparent earthly success of the ungodly as compared to the godly. He concluded, "If I had said, 'I will speak thus [of all my doubts],' I would have betrayed . . . your children" (v. 15). Asaph determined that when there was a mist in the pulpit, there would surely be fog in the pews. I vowed to keep my reservations to myself. A doubting preacher can bring mass confusion to the flock.

### Doubting...While Leading

Several pastors and I once discussed the fall from grace of a nationally known pastor. His ministry thrived up to the moment when his immoral actions were exposed.

"How could God bless this man's work and ministry while he lived a life of hypocrisy and deceit?" we all wondered.

"God never promised to honor the preacher," one friend reasoned; "but he has promised always to honor his Word."

"We must never back down from preaching the Word just because we cannot live up to it all," said another. "If we wait until we've mastered all the truths in a passage, many texts will remain forever unpreached."

Trying to simplify the discussion, I added, "I can't postpone preaching on gluttony until I control my weight. Gluttony is a sin no matter how much I weigh."

Therefore, I vowed to preach God's Word carefully and faithfully while I worked through my confusions.

### Winding Faith

But I couldn't ignore my internal struggle. In my spare time, I resolved to study astral physics and quantum mechanics until I could reconcile the Bible and science. I started with Einstein's theories and read books like *Einstein's Universe* by Nigel Calder, *Relativity Visualized* by Lewis Epstein, and *A Brief History of Time* by Stephen Hawking, until I could explain in simple terms how massive bodies warp space-time, how the universe works, and why time stops at the event horizon of a black hole. The concept of eternity was easy to accept when I realized observable places exist in the universe where time actually does stand still.

My faith was bolstered in the biological arena when *The Search for Eve* by Michael Brown was published. This scholarly work, based on years of careful research on human mitochondria from people groups all over the world, demonstrated beyond the shadow of a doubt that every human being alive today had one common female ancestor. Scientific proof for the existence of Eve further sustained my faith.

I studied geology in order to satisfy my mind that geologists had valid reasons for dating rocks back into the millions and billions of years old. I also read the works of Christians who attempted to reconcile the apparent contradiction between science and Scripture by postulating a "mature earth" theory—that God created the universe with fossils and stars that just looked millions and billions of years old, when they were actually created just thousands of years prior. Though the idea that God played tricks in Creation was untenable to me, I admired the honest attempt to solve the apparent disharmony.

## DEALING WITH DOUBT

### Preaching with Doubt

But this long search—and long periods of unresolved doubt—stole my joy, sapped my strength, and affected the faith of those around me. I wish I had lived with more faith during those years. I remember preaching funerals while wondering if there was life after death. Preaching with power about the miracles in Scripture while pondering their validity produced guilt. However, I never dipped into unbelieving despair. I never preached things I did not believe.

Not surprisingly, relief came from the Bible. Whatever the Creation accounts in Genesis meant, there was no confusion as to the meaning of Hebrews 11:3: "By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible."

How did the writer to the Hebrews know in the first century what it took science nineteen hundred years more to discover? I concluded God must have told him.

I made peace with my doubts when I concluded that the main issue of faith is not deciphering the facts of Creation but settling the issue of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. I could not reconcile Genesis 1 and 2 just yet, but I could trust my life to the One who cheated death and promised that if I believed in him, I, too, could cheat death and live forever. I concluded Paul had the right perspective. In an attempt to convert the Athenians in Acts 17:16-31, Paul mentioned the God who created heaven and earth, but he planted his arguments firmly in the fact that Jesus Christ was not in the tomb on Easter morning. I decided to anchor my faith likewise.

The answer to unbelief resided in a choice of my will. It was my choice to believe the Scriptures—or not. My faith could not rest on feelings or emotions. Faith could not depend on my ability to figure everything out. Mark Twain said, "It is not what I don't understand about the Bible that bothers me, but what I do understand." I understood enough to believe. The rest would have to take care of itself.

I never sensed that God punished me for my doubts. I never once had the impression that he was angry with my unbelief—disappointed perhaps, but not irate. I sensed all along that he lovingly supported my searching and stood unflinchingly by my side. Never once did I feel betrayed or deserted. He knew I would work through my struggles. Perhaps he considered my life and ministry worth saving.

—ROGER BARRIER; adapted from Leaders, © 1998 Christianity Today International.

### Discuss

1. What did you learn from his story? Did you identify with any of his struggles?
2. How have you responded to nagging questions and doubts? What kind of reading has been helpful?
3. Is it possible to lead a church well, even as you combat doubt? How are some ways you can do that?

## DEALING WITH DOUBT

### Hope for the Doubting Leader

*Ambiguity is inevitable in ministry, but press on anyway.*

Hebrews 6:11

As I get older, I'm more sure of less, and I'm less sure of more! But one thing I've learned is that certainty has a price. The good and wise leader has a clear idea of what issues are worth paying that price (and I suspect it's a fairly short list) and what issues are not. In my ministry I've found that, though I may have strong convictions about a subject, it doesn't mean that it's always necessary or even advisable to express my certainty in public.

So the issue boils down to two questions: When do I want to be perceived as certain, and when do I want to avoid that perception?

I want to be certain about fundamental doctrines. All but one of Paul's thirteen epistles are written to churches or pastors, and he returns again and again to the theme of preaching a pure gospel: "Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming" (Eph. 4:14).

However, I don't speak *ex cathedra* about programs or policies. The Scriptures contain no doctrine of "pastoral infallibility," no mandate to equate your word with God's. But our stature can tempt us, from time to time, to draw a line in the sand about a particular (and personally heartfelt) program or policy of the church, saying, "This is what God wants, so choose ye this day whom ye shall serve." If any problems arise, however, your credibility suffers. People know better.

I find it helpful to be clear about my expectations. Recently I had an engaged couple in my office for counseling, and as always I asked them, "What are your expectations about the relationship? Things will go smoother after the wedding if you voice your expectations now."

In the same way, I've always approached my church callings as wedding engagements: both parties enter the relationship with expectations, which ought to be expressed up front.

I also try to remember the difference between vision and timing. In one church I served, we went through two building programs like clockwork. When a third building project presented itself, my confidence was soaring. We jumped in with both feet, put out brochures, did stewardship meetings, and went whole hog to get the project completed in two years.

I was sure about it and talked often and confidently about God's vision for this new building. But the building didn't get built in two years as predicted. Years later, my successor in that church is just now getting that project together again. Was my vision wrong? No, but my timing was. Instead of its being built in two years, right now it appears the Lord had five to seven years in mind.

#### Strategies for Straddlers

One season during my high school football days, our coach installed an incredibly high-powered offense—an professional team would have been proud of its complexity. We gave it our best shot, but the complex system was hard for us to learn. Our school was favored to win the opening game, but when the whistle blew, our guys ran around the field not sure where they were supposed to go and who they were supposed to block. It's a game we should have won over a smaller high school, but our squad was beaten.

A few days later we sat down to watch a film of the game. On play after play, you could see everyone hesitating on the line of scrimmage. By this time the coach was screaming at us, "If you're going to make a

## DEALING WITH DOUBT

mistake, at least do it aggressively!” Over the years my coach’s words have stuck with me. Sometimes in ministry, we’re not sure what we’re doing and we hesitate, letting circumstances control us.

Or worse: in some situations pastors have given up altogether. I was visiting one church where only 50 people were scattered across a sanctuary that seated 250. The congregational singing was weak and half-hearted. I wondered why the pastor, who was leading the singing, didn’t say, “Let’s all get up and move closer together.”

Yet as I sat through the service, I started noticing other signs that the pastor had simply given up. The board where the hymn numbers are posted was empty, the sanctuary needed fresh paint, and the sign outside didn’t list the times of the services—dozens of little things that said, “I’m too tired for this, and what difference does it make anyway?”

It’s easy to get discouraged and give up when you’re faced with uncertainty. But it’s not all that difficult to adopt strategies of leadership that help project the confidence of a Churchill (a confidence church members want and need), even when on the inside you really feel more like a Hamlet.

**Let us reason together.** Few topics are harder to preach than predestination. Even the apostle Paul had to shrug his shoulders on this subject and say, “Who has known the mind of the Lord?” (Romans 11:34). So once when I preached a sermon on predestination, I began by admitting, “I really don’t know if anything I’m going to say is true, but this is a doctrine that believers need to deal with, and I’m going to share with you a progress report about my own current thinking on the subject.”

Though the hard-core Calvinists were disappointed with me, most in the congregation were glad somebody admitted the subject was open for discussion. “All I can do is give you my best interpretation for now,” I told them, “and I make no promise that if I preach again next year, I won’t have a new point of view. But we need to come to grips with this issue because making no decision is in itself a decision.”

Throughout my sermon the tone of the message was, “Here’s what I see, what I feel. Let me tell you why I believe this way, why I’m excited about it, and why I think you should be excited about it too. Let me try to persuade you, as one Christian to another.”

I would never take this approach with fundamental doctrines, but it works with vital doctrines that don’t affect salvation. I am forthright about my interpretation, but I give my people the right to disagree with dignity.

At the same time, I’m under no obligation to lay out all the alternatives to my views, being evenhanded with each, suggesting the congregation choose the alternative that best suits them. That’s not leadership; it’s an invitation to indecision and paralysis within the church.

I once saw a Christian drama group put on a skit about pastors and their churches called *That’s What We Pay You For*. Committee members come to the pastor telling him they’re upset that in a sermon he gave them two or three possibilities for interpreting a passage. They don’t care for that; they’re looking for guidance: that’s what they pay him for.

A sermon is not a lecture but an occasion where I am called to persuade people to make a deeper commitment to Christ.

**Writing it down.** It’s astounding this power God has given us of being able to put feelings into words, of giving names to things so we can understand them better and gain the victory. That’s why I keep a personal journal; it’s a place to lay out all the confusions I feel, all the uncertainties, the angers, and the fears, to confess them before God in written prayer.

For example, take the night I realized the building project I had been so anxious for was going to grind to an unceremonious halt. When I came home, I began reading the Psalms, and I got to Psalm 132:

O Lord, remember David  
and all the hardships he endured.  
He swore an oath to the Lord  
and made a vow to the Mighty One of Jacob:

## DEALING WITH DOUBT

“I will not enter my house  
or go to my bed—  
I will allow no sleep to my eyes,  
no slumber to my eyelids,  
till I find a place for the Lord,  
a dwelling for the Mighty One of Jacob.” (vv. 1-5)

It describes David’s struggle to find a place for the ark. He won’t rest until he gets it done. I wanted to build a sanctuary for God. Our church had studied the theology of worship. We had studied the theology of space. From that we had developed a wonderful theological document. And then we drew up plans that expressed perfectly what we believed about worship. I was so excited about it, but it wasn’t going to happen.

After I read about David’s struggle, I started writing in my journal—two pages in which I poured out my feelings and questions: “Lord, why did you bring us so far in this thing? Everything seemed so clear up to now; it was going so well. But it has stopped! I’ve been here 14 years, and I wanted this to be an exclamation point to my ministry. Now it looks like an asterisk. Lord, help me—help me to continue pursuing this, or help me let go if I need to let go of it.”

In taking up pen and paper, I see the shadows gain shape; I demystify them, give them the human discipline of sentence structure and syntax, and arrive at a way to face the problem.

### Over the Falls

In discussing the issue of vocation at life’s different stages, Karl Barth notes that younger pastors are usually the ones who boldly plunge ahead, while older men often play things close to the vest—they’ve been through the mill before, or perhaps they have more to lose. Then Barth asks the rhetorical question, “Does the river slow down as it approaches the falls?”

The answer, of course, is that the river gains speed, rushing fastest at the very moment it plunges over the edge. I want my ministry to pick up speed as I go along. I don’t want to be careless and wantonly make mistakes; I want to use the wisdom God has given me to follow the bends that life presents. But as I face uncertainty, I don’t want to trickle off into some side stream. I want to be like that river, rushing toward the falls—and when I go over the edge, I look forward to falling into the arms of God.

—BEN PATTERSON; adapted from *Empowering Your Church through Creativity and Change*. © 1995 Christianity Today International.

### Discuss

1. What doubts have you had to deal with at various stages of your ministry?
2. What expectations does the church have of me? What expectations do I have of the church?
3. How have I discussed doctrines or ideas I’m not sure about?



**DEALING WITH DOUBT****Strategies for Fending off Doubt**

*Cultivate holy practices to minimize the presence of doubt.*

John 20:27

Don't worry too much about doubt! Doubt focuses attention on ourselves and our anxieties and stops us from trusting in God. A preoccupation with doubt is just as pointless as a preoccupation with death: it doesn't change the situation, and it distracts our attention from the opportunities that life has to offer. Preoccupation with doubt weakens or even cuts our lifeline to the living God; it distracts us from our life of prayer and devotion. It can paralyze our spiritual growth. Given the potential doubt has to bog down our faith; we need to employ strategies to ensure it doesn't immobilize our spiritual lives.

**Read Deeply**

*Theology.* Try to read books that will deepen your understanding of the Christian faith—in other words, which will help you see how solid and substantial Christianity really is. It is by feeding your faith that you can starve your doubts to death. Read books that will stimulate thinking about the content of your faith. This will not merely help you develop your own Christian mind; it will give you the resources to help others think through similar questions.

*Spirituality.* Read books that will stimulate your thinking about prayer and devotion. Remember, people have been putting their trust in Jesus Christ for the past two thousand years, and many have written of their experiences in works that have become spiritual classics. There are times when you find prayer difficult, or feel like you are going through a spiritual dry patch—a period in your life in which your spiritual life seems dry and parched. Reading classic works about prayer and devotion can help you through these difficult periods. A couple of excellent books to read are *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas a Kempis and *Practice of the Presence of God* by Brother Lawrence.

*Scripture.* Most importantly, read the Bible regularly with a daily study plan. Keep a note of verse that seem helpful or relevant to the topic of doubt. And don't allow your study to be of purely academic interest; your faith affects the way you act, your values and aspirations, and your ideas. Allow faith to become obedient. Allow your head and heart to interact.

**Ignore Hostility**

There's a lot of skepticism and even anger toward Christian faith out there. But the popular reaction to an idea has no bearing on whether it is true or not. People may ridicule faith in God—but that doesn't mean it is wrong. Most people outside the faith have little understanding of what Christianity is all about. Very often they reject a caricature of the gospel, not the gospel itself.

It isn't as if everyone has tried Christianity and then decided it is no good. Nor is it as if they've all thought deeply about it and decided it can't be right. Most people give Christianity little thought and very often base even that on misunderstandings. You may find yourself in the privileged position of helping people come to faith by removing their misconceptions and misunderstandings of the gospel. But don't let outside derision against the faith rattle you. It often stems, not from intelligent skepticism, but merely from being misinformed.

**Seek Out Support**

Make sure you don't get isolated and have to cope with doubts alone. You need to be encouraged and uplifted by fellow believers. If you're in church leadership, this can be difficult because you may not feel comfortable disclosing your struggles to some people in your church. But it's important that you find some kind of group, comprised of trusted friends with whom you can share what you're going through.

Doubt can be a symptom of inadequate support. The world aims to isolate you, to demoralize you, to break down your confidence in yourself and the gospel. You need to be able to discuss problems you have in common with other Christians—such as your struggles with doubt and how to cope with the pressure brought on Christians by society in general. Encourage your fellow Christians, and let them encourage you.

—ALISTER MCGRATH; adapted from *Doubting* (IVP, 2007). Used by Permission.


## **DEALING WITH DOUBT**

### **Discuss**

1. What practices have you found decrease the presence of doubt in your life?
2. Have you regularly employed the practices described above? When you are beset by doubts, which do you tend to avoid? Which do you turn to?
3. What are some books that have helped you most? How did they help you?

**MINISTERING TO CHALLENGING PEOPLE****Further Exploration**

*Books and other resources to help you deal with doubt.*

 **[BuildingChurchLeaders.com](#)**: Leadership training resources from Christianity Today International.

 **[LeadershipJournal.net](#)**. This website offers practical advice and articles for church leaders.

***Doubting: Growing through the Uncertainties of Faith*** by Alister McGrath. (InterVarsity Press: 2007, ISBN 9780830833528). In a world filled with skepticism, even our faith is affected by misgivings! What's a Christian to do? McGrath asserts that our doubts are *not* a sign of spiritual weakness—they're evidence of growing pains! He explores our qualms biblically, personally, and culturally—putting them in perspective and showing us how to handle them.

***O Me of Little Faith: True Confessions of a Spiritual Weakling*** by Jason Boyett. (Zondervan: 2010, ISBN 9780310289494). This book is written for doubters by a doubter about the relationship between uncertainty and faith. It is honest and hopeful as readers will grow to understand that doubt is part of the human condition, that salvation is not dependent on the sturdiness of our faith, and that, above all, they are not alone.

***Faith & Doubt*** by John Ortberg. (Zondervan: 2008, 9780310253518). Author and pastor John Ortberg explores his own doubts and the observations of philosophers and theologians to discover when doubt becomes an obstacle to faith, and when it helps you grow.

***Knowing Christ Today: Why We Can Trust Spiritual Knowledge*** by Dallas Willard. (HarperOne: 2009, 9780060882440). Arguing that the standard of knowledge is truth and proper evidence, the writer leads readers through his proofs for the existence of God, the resurrection of Jesus, God's ongoing intervention in the world and the then logical possibility of a vital spiritual practice centered on interactive life with Christ.