

How to Respond to Doubt

In a Peanuts cartoon Lucy and Charlie Brown are walking home from their last day of school for the year. Charlie Brown says to Lucy, "Lucy, I got straight A's, isn't that great?!" Lucy turns, looks at him very skeptically and with doubt and says, "I don't believe you Charlie Brown. Unless I see your report card, I cannot believe you."

Lucy's doubt stems from knowing Charlie Brown. He is the poster boy of the born-loser, the guy who tries hard but things never seem to turn out right for him. Lucy knows him as the pitcher and manager of a baseball team that has never won a game and as someone who is engulfed in problems about everything in life. Charlie Brown is that "lovable loser," possibly because we see a part of ourselves in him. As this cartoon illustrates, it is easy to have doubts. Whenever something happens that goes against what we know or what we expect, we can doubt.

The important thing is not that we have doubts in the first place, but rather how we respond to doubt. There are several ways that we can respond. One way is to suppress our doubts and convince ourselves that what we feel is not right, that we shouldn't doubt anything about our faith and we resolve to "follow the crowd;" whether or not the crowd is right in its actions. Another response would be to rely solely on our experience and conclude that if we had not experienced ourselves, then that which we are being told to be true, cannot be right, that whatever is causing the doubt is wrong. That is, doubt is not a possibility when we only believe what we have personally experienced. A third way of dealing with doubt is to set aside our own experiences and knowledge and totally except this alternate possibility as the truth, regardless of how probable or improbable it may be. This is what many conspiracy theories capitalize on, that there are a number of people who

would disregard their own experiences and knowledge and unquestioningly accept this conspiracy theory as being true, regardless of how improbable it is. Needless to say, these three responses to doubt are not the best way to respond to doubt.

A fourth way to deal with doubt is to use that doubt to question our experiences or expectations, looking at this new set of data and perhaps arrive at a conclusion that would be more consistent with the cause of the doubt rather than our own expectations. We are open to the possibility that this new thing could be true and we are willing to change our expectations to fit that possibility. In relation to religious faith, this kind of response to doubt can help to strengthen our faith instead of shattering it.

This is what happened to the apostle Thomas. It wasn't because his faith was weak that he didn't believe the others when they told him that they were visited by the risen Jesus. Instead, it was out of strength that he was able to ask for "proof." He voiced those doubts, questioning how these new observations fit in with what he knew. As a result, his faith was strengthened. Thomas' story continues in that it is believed that he went on to established the Christian church in India, a church that is still exists.

Our doubts today can have no less of an impact than they did for Thomas. Lee Strobel was an award-winning journalist with the Chicago Tribune and a spiritual skeptic. He even called himself an atheist, not believing there could be a God when there was so much suffering in the world. After his wife became Christian and did not change in ways he expected, he decided to use his investigative skills as a reporter to check out the story of Jesus Christ. His investigation led him to many scholars who are recognized authorities in their respective fields. His questions and their answers led him to conclude that the evidence for Jesus was convincing.

He chronicled his investigation in the book "The Case For Christ" and has since become a Christian; had served as a pastor at Willow Creek Community Church in Illinois and Saddleback Church in California; has written several books and currently produces web-based material regarding Christianity. The point is, Lee Strobel used his doubts to question his old set of beliefs and the validity of new ones concluding that the New Testament relates a true story that is believable and he came to faith.

While our growth from our own personal doubts may not have resulted in a change in career path like the apostle Thomas or Lee Strobel; by using the strength of our faith to question and explore the doubts that we have, we can also have our faith strengthened and deepened. Having doubts may be an indicator that we have gone astray and need to get back on track.

Doubts can arise when we are having a so-called crisis of faith. It can happen at the death of a loved one, the end of a relationship, the loss of a job or whenever things go badly. We need to remember that it is at these times especially that we can feel the presence of God, helping us, guiding us and even carrying us through those difficult times. It's like the "Footprints in the Sand" where when we think we are alone and that God has abandoned us, seeing only one set of footprints in the sand; that is when Jesus is carrying us.

Too often we see doubting as a sign of weakness. Some people believe that if we ever doubt our faith, then it isn't strong enough; that we should just blindly accept the church's explanations about the Bible. But the Biblical story tells us that we can doubt not only what seems to be a new thing happening, such as the Resurrection of Jesus, but also to question, to doubt the status quo. If there were

no people who questioned the status quo, who doubted that the status quo is the way things were 'supposed' to be and had to be, then the events from Holy Week and even the Exodus would not have been possible. However, because of the doubts and questions of those who lived through those events, the actions of God in the world are recognized we can more clearly see the love of God to care for humanity and we are brought closer to the God who loves us.

YouTube links:

Gospel and Sermon: <https://youtu.be/py1bThWf82M>

Service: <https://youtu.be/ObFwJZel4JA>