

Is It Okay to Have Doubts?

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Real Christians don't doubt. Or at least that's the unspoken message in many churches today. Well, if that's true, then I guess I'm not a real Christian because I've had (and still have) my share of doubts. By the way, your parents and youth pastors have them too!

As humans, we all have limitations. We all experience doubts simply because we cannot know all the answers. So be encouraged—you are not alone. In order to live with our doubts in a spiritually healthy and faith-building way, we need to be clear about what doubt is and what it isn't.

First, as J. P. Moreland and Klaus Issler point out in their book *In Search of a Confident Faith* (InterVarsity Press, 2008), there are differences between *unbelief*, *doubt*, and *lack of belief*.

1. *Unbelief*—people willfully set themselves against a biblical teaching (e.g., saying that Jesus is not the Son of God).
2. *Doubt*—people have an intellectual, emotional, or psychological barrier to a more secure confidence in a biblical teaching or to God Himself (e.g., they believe God is always there for them, but when bad stuff happens they struggle to believe that).
3. *Lack of belief*—people don't believe a biblical teaching or idea but want to (e.g., they need some help to believe).

Second, all doubts aren't created equal; there are different flavors. The two most common are *intellectual* and *emotional* doubts. Given a Christian understanding of faith as “the reality of what is hoped for, the proof of what is not seen” (Heb 11:1)—as opposed to “blind faith” or wishing—the recipe for overcoming doubt is not to somehow dig deep and crank out more faith by holding your breath and concentrating really hard. Instead, what you need to do is have the courage to “doubt your doubts.” Investigate. Seek the truth.

Here's a plan for dealing with intellectual doubts: (1) be specific about what your doubts are—write them out and list reasons for and against; (2) start by reading the articles in this study Bible; (3) remind yourself that you are not the only one who has ever asked this question—99.9 percent of the time, a reasonable answer exists.

Sometimes emotional doubts look like intellectual ones, but the root cause of emotional doubts turns out not to be unanswered questions at all. Sources of emotional doubt include: (1) experiencing disappointment, failure, pain, or loss; (2) having unresolved conflict or wounds from your past that need to be addressed; (3) letting unruly emotions carry you away for no good reason; (4) being spiritually dry; (5) fearing to really commit to someone. Emotions are normal, but they aren't always right. They need to be examined. I may be emotionally down, but that may have nothing whatsoever to do with my confidence that the NT is reliable or that God exists.

If you find yourself doubting, you're in good company (Mk 9:24). Having the courage to doubt your doubts and investigate their cause leads to greater confidence as a follower of Jesus. That is what the journey of faith is all about.

