



Growth Through Doubt

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I make a living flying helicopters, which reminds me of a joke: How do you know if you're talking to a helicopter pilot? They will tell you they are a helicopter pilot and bring it up constantly in conversation.

In aviation, safety is paramount, and because of that, any concerns or doubts about safety are taken seriously. We do preflight risk assessments where safety concerns and doubts are scored, and if the cumulative score is too great, the flight is canceled until the doubts are mitigated. Also, in-flight we are constantly reassessing safety risks and will adjust our plans mid-flight – and even turn around or land at the nearest open area – if doubts, concerns, or risks get too high. So as pilots we are taught to not only listen to but also develop that inner part of our consciousness that causes us to doubt, because it is something that keeps us alive.

Recently I have been reading a book titled *Faith After Doubt* by Brian D. McLaren as part of a book club. Reading the book clued me in to the idea that doubt can be used to grow spiritually. The author describes stages of doubt that we as believers go through. Many of us in the book club identified with going through the stages of doubt almost exactly as described by the book's author. Simultaneously many expressed feeling unsatisfied within the confines of our ecclesias, yearning for something more but not wanting to abandon friends, loved ones, and places that we have strong ties to.

The recent pandemic seems to be the catalyst that forced many to rethink our relationships with our ecclesias and faith communities, due to the shock of not meeting in person and having to switch to zoom and web-streaming. For some, it seems the prospects of life and death due to Covid-19 brought doubts to the forefront. For others, the doubts have been in the background for a long period of time.

So, I wonder: Why is it that, in a spiritual sense, I have been discouraged from doubting? Perhaps, if doubt is something that keeps me alive *professionally*, doubt could be something that keeps me alive *spiritually*.

Reflecting on all this helped me get to the point where I could be honest and acknowledge my spiritual doubts – that I wasn't alone in having them – and to realize that I can learn and grow from them.

So, doubt has become particularly interesting to me since I have switched from doubt being something to be ashamed of, to it being a useful tool to help identify things that are unsettled.

Types of Doubt

Let's take some time to further explore some of the types of doubts out there: doubts in ourselves (we'll call these Self Doubt), doubts in others (Social Doubt), doubts in our faith (Spiritual Doubt), and doubts in our impulses (Positive Self-preserving Doubt).

Doubts in Ourselves. Doubts in ourselves can be our insecurities. We don't think we are up to the tasks ahead, or we think that we are beyond forgiveness, redemption, or undeserving of love. Which leads to self-judgement.

Doubts in Others. Doubts in others grows out of witnessing people acting badly. When the powerful exploit the weak. When bad actions are committed, especially in the name of something good. Or even questioning the fellowship and social practices of our ecclesias and communities. Which leads to judgements against each other within our ecclesia.

Doubts in our Faith. Does God really exist? Is the Bible that we have truly the inspired word of God? Does God really want us to discriminate against people based on gender or sexual orientation? Does God want and therefore cause terrible things to happen? Things like wars and disasters that cause so much suffering?

Doubts in our Impulses. Doubts in our impulses are doubts because of fear. These are the types of doubts that keep us from getting hurt – that keep us from acting impulsively — because of the fear of consequences. This is Positive Self-preserving Doubt. For example, we shouldn't just do or say the first thing that comes to mind. Or maybe we should rethink our plans before committing to them. Another of way of thinking of this would be the times when doubt and fear overlap.

It is important to note that many times doubts and fear go hand in hand. To me, it breaks down to the idea that doubt is the feeling that something might be wrong, and we fear the consequences of what the doubt is about. In other words, we fear the results of our actions, so we doubt taking that action. And this fear can also be centered around our Spiritual Doubt – fear of not belonging if we share that we have doubts about God or about the Bible being one hundred percent literal.

Depending on the type of doubts we are experiencing, we might have different strategies to address it. For example, Self Doubt might be addressed by seeing a counselor or therapist, however those professionals most likely aren't equipped to deal with spiritual doubts. Deep Spiritual Doubt about our creator and our purpose may need to be worked out in solitude for a while, and may need to be shared and tackled with a close confidant eventually. In any case the first step is to admit the doubts exist.

I have some doubts. I doubt that one hundred percent of what I have been taught and experienced was *The Truth*, that maybe we have not only gotten the social aspects of fellowship wrong but also that we have interpreted the message of the Bible wrong. My questions are whether I have been mistaken in how best to serve and worship the Lord.

For years I doubted if I should get baptized as a Christadelphian due to the amended un-amended split. I wanted, and still want, no part in that sort of legalism. Why are we arguing about trivial matters when there are huge issues that need to be solved? How come we spend so much time studying and developing our knowledge of the Bible, but so little time expressing our faith through works as described in James 2? Are we modern day versions of the Scribes and Pharisees?

I doubted the entire premise of the un-amended amended division to the point that I doubted our entire fellowship and didn't want to be baptized. But over time I began to understand this doubt as a Social Doubt, not as a Spiritual Doubt. I grew when I decided that other people's actions – good and bad – can't be allowed to dictate my relationship with God.

Through doubting, I have come into the idea that it is important not to be so prideful to think that we have perfected following Christ. From time to time we might need to reexamine our actions and motivations – to recognize that while many amazing things have been accomplished in God's name, many times we as believers are falling flat on our faces in our walk. Our actions, while noble in principle, can oftentimes end up being the opposite of loving and Christ-like. I

cringe at my behaviors in the past towards people from other faiths. How quickly I allowed myself to think that me and my group were superior Christians, that the other groups were simultaneously beneath us and enemies.

Faithful People Doubted

Taking a look in the Bible, we read about Abraham and Sarah having doubts, starting at the first place we read about them in Genesis 12. Abraham, like so many of us, heard the call of our creator, and started out on a journey. However, almost immediately Abraham doubted – in this case for his and Sarah’s safety while traveling through foreign lands. In Chapter 17, Sarah laughs at the thought of having children so late in life, doubting that she could give birth to a great nation in her nineties. They both had completely understandable reasons to doubt: for their safety; for their ability to be blessed with something they wanted so badly but hadn’t been able to achieve for years.

In Judges 6, Gideon doubts that the LORD is with his people, since they were being brutally oppressed by their enemies, the Midianites. Gideon was also called into action, but he doubted that he could be the one to save his people, since he was the least of his family, and his clan was the least of their tribe. He asked for multiple signs before he could believe that his small group could go against a large enemy. I can’t think of anyone with common sense who wouldn’t have had those same doubts.

In John 20:24-29, we read about Thomas, someone whose name is synonymous with doubting. He needed to see and feel the physical damage to Jesus’s body before he could suspend his doubt in the resurrection.

Abraham, Sarah, and Gideon doubted themselves, and they all, including Thomas, doubted God’s ability to fulfill promises. But we also know that they were examples of faith as recounted in Hebrews 11. Which opens us up to the question: Were they faithful *in spite of* their doubt? Or were they faithful *because of* their doubt?

Doubt is not the opposite of Faith. *Oh ye of little faith* is not a different way of saying *Oh ye of much doubt*. Doubt may very well open the door to our spiritual growth.

We have the preceding and many other examples of doubt throughout the Bible. Doubt is, in fact, a very common feeling for people – and not just in a spiritual sense. We experience doubt in many daily situations, as well as the bigger life-altering events, and everything in between.

Doubting is a very routine human experience. In fact, it probably saves us from a lot of pain and suffering when we pause before doing something impulsive. For example, I doubt I can jump off the roof into the pool without getting hurt. Or I think maybe I shouldn't just go yell at my bosses because they won't give me a raise. Or I can doubt if now is a good time to buy a house.

When it comes to everyday life, we hopefully have people we trust and who we can confide in about our doubts. And of course we can always pray about them. But it has struck me that as a group we almost never hear anyone talking about their Spiritual Doubts! People are ashamed to admit them or openly talk about them – as if the moment you have admitted a doubt you will be stoned or excommunicated. But *doubt does not equal sin* because Christ doubted, too, but he didn't sin. Therefore, doubt can't equal sin.

I think we should be cautious in assuming what Christ's thoughts were. With that being said, I also think we have some glimpses into how Christ dealt with doubt. In Matthew 26, Jesus prays in Gethsemane:

Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to his disciples, "Sit here, while I go over there and pray." And taking with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me." And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will." (Matt 26:36-39)

In his prayer in Gethsemane, I think we might be seeing Christ doubting his own strength to persevere through his coming trials. He experienced the Positive Self-preserving type of Doubt. It is important to note how, when faced with these fears and doubts, he defers to his Father.

In Matthew 27, Jesus prays during his crucifixion:

From noon until three in the afternoon darkness came over all the land. About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?" (which means "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"). (Matt 27:45-46)

Jesus was perfect, stronger in faith and in many other ways than any other person could ever be. But even he, after hours of agony, slowly suffocating, nailed to the cross, moments before death, when he was exhausted, appears to have had doubts deep down, too. And who could

blame him for that? I don't think he would have felt shame in how he reacted in this situation – the weight of the world on his shoulders, at the focal point of God's ultimate plan. I think those doubts and fears from earlier were on the verge of coming true – for him, the scariest possibility was to be separated from his father.

We know Christ did not sin. And, as best as I can tell, Christ doubted. Which, therefore, means to me that doubt does not equal sin. Doubt is a normal reaction for all of us. Thinking of the examples of Christ doubting helps brings us to the realization that the question is not *if* we should doubt – but how can we use doubt for spiritual growth?

Doubt Should Not Be Ignored

Doubting – and then reacting the right way – can lead to growth. But unfortunately, on the other hand, doubts and fears left to fester, unaddressed, lead to negative outcomes.

For an analogy, if an aircraft gets a rusty spot or some corrosion, you can paint over it and it will look fine for a period of time, but the rust, the decay, will continue beneath the surface and eventually not only will the damage come back to the surface, but also the underlying structure will be damaged. Eventually, that aircraft won't be safe to fly, and over time the whole thing will fall apart.

Likewise, if we have spiritual doubts and we just continue on like normal – throwing on our Sunday-best and putting on a smile – it will probably work out for a while, years even, but eventually it will catch up and most likely be worse. The work needs to be put in. Problems need to be faced and addressed. It starts with being honest with ourselves and those around us. We also need to be compassionate and supportive with others in their time of need and deep doubts, when they are most vulnerable. We cannot simply be judgmental. We should strive to foster a loving environment where we can be open with each other. But too often the opposite happens. It is a learned behavior that we have to hide our issues because we may be punished by the group for speaking up. The squeaky wheel should get the grease, but instead it often gets the hammer.

Unfortunately, there are plenty of real-life examples of people who have had doubts, concerns, fears, whatever they might be, and they kept them to themselves, until eventually it grew to a point where it was more painful to suppress those feelings than to continue on with the status quo – and they stop attending. If someone doesn't have people they feel safe, comfortable, and respected by, to go to for help, they will just leave the group. Think back over the years about

people who used to attend memorial service and then just disappeared, or the young ones who no longer attend Sunday school. People don't study the Bible, hear the gospel message, decide to get baptized, and then one day wake up atheists! Yet year after year, churches all over the world are becoming more and more empty. It is not trending in a good direction. And it is a very real possibility that we are failing ourselves. Ignoring doubts can lead to spiritual death!

Unaddressed doubt leads to pain, and more problems. But it doesn't have to be that way. In fact, doubt can be an instrument of growth.

Cross-checking Our Course

When traveling, you need to make constant course corrections. If, on the route somewhere, you get the feeling you are going the wrong way, it is smart to stop and pull out a map or ask directions – not just be stubborn and maybe get lost or go out of the way. While flying, we have many tools to cross-check our course – satellite positioning like GPS, ground-based homing beacons, requesting help from air traffic controllers on the ground who are tracking us with radar, celestial navigation, and even simple compasses. Remember, our lives are a constant journey. We don't just believe, get baptized, and say, "Mission accomplished." We will need to put in constant effort every day until the current constraints of life are lifted from us.

Doubt, when used properly, allows us to go back to our foundations and build back up stronger. Start with our rock, our solid foundation, and carefully go from there. Where do we start? What is our foundation? In first 1 Peter 2 we read that Christ is that cornerstone.

Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind. Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good. As you come to him, the living Stone – rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him – you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For in Scripture it says:

“See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.”

Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe,

“The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone,”

and,

“A stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.” (1Pet 2:1-8)

Christ is the cornerstone. He has laid the groundwork and given us the blueprints. Our building materials are the fruit of the spirit. As we read in Galatians 5:

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. (Gal 5:22)

We need to be very mindful to reset and use only the right materials and the right motivations. We must recognize that we will need to go back to ground level and use Christ as our cornerstone and grow and build from there. What we end up building should exemplify him, and be a reflection of his character.

It is also important to recognize we cannot be perfect. Eventually, we need to rebuild again. We *need to doubt*, and to check if our building is starting to lean – to check if, through neglect, we are letting the building deteriorate. This idea of rebuilding is repeated over and over again in the Bible. Think of the children of Israel turning from God, then being wiped out, repenting, then building back up again, and later on repeating that cycle. Or the Law of Moses being fulfilled and rebuilt in Christ. Or being reborn through baptism.

Oftentimes, doubts come from the inconsistencies between how we enact our beliefs and what we know about Jesus’s teachings. In psychology, this is called cognitive dissonance. The basic example of this is that I follow Christ’s teachings on love, while also behaving in unloving ways to others, which creates an uncomfortable feeling. That uncomfortable feeling we get inside from cognitive dissonance is a reflection of doubt. This is another reason why it is important to doubt: it is a way for us to identify when we are diverging from Christ’s teachings – which gives us a chance to get back on track.

When working on spiritual doubts, it is important to be cognizant that our faith is about our relationships with Christ and God. In particular, when the doubt has to do with the Bible, it can be helpful to compartmentalize the Bible as something separate and different from our relationships with God and Jesus. This means that our doubts in the Bible don’t have to threaten our relationship and faith in Christ and our Father. The Bible is an important tool, but it is nothing without them. *They* are the foundation the Bible is built on, not the other way around.

Our faith is about our relationship with God. In order to better understand God and our relationship, we develop beliefs. Those beliefs are made up of many ideas we have learned over time as we have grown. However, the chances are that a few of those beliefs are flawed. Finding those flaws and working on them is vital! Just as vital as it is to find flaws in an aircraft's design and components, as well as the flaws in the training and procedures of the pilots who fly them. Replacing damaged and defective parts doesn't stop an aircraft from flying again. Retraining pilots doesn't stop them from flying again. It is the opposite. Making repairs and retraining are what keeps us flying safely for years to come.

This is all part of why it is okay to doubt, question, and change individual beliefs. Individual beliefs are not the same as our faith, or our relationship with God. The process of doubting, questioning, and changing *strengthens* and *refines* our faith.

My Own Warning Lights

I have experienced personal growth over the past few years. And the scriptural passage that both set off alarms and warning lights, and then helped me see more clearly, was Galatians 3.

I have come to fully understand what it means to say that we are all created equal, to be loved by God, and to serve and worship God.

Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise. (Gal 3:23-29)

Paul explains how we are set free from the law in Galatians. I have come to realize that I have been part of the problem.

I was happy to accept that it doesn't matter that I am not Jewish. All of us, including myself, are able to be part of the promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, not through a genetic

birthright, but through a spiritual birthright after being reborn during baptism. Because *there is no Jew or Greek*.

I was also happy to accept that it doesn't matter if my ancestors were slaves in the past or – if the law of this land had not been changed 159 years ago – that I would have been subject to that same bondage. Because God does not judge based on our race (as if there is even more than a single race made in God's image!). Our lot in life, our status in the world, how much money we have is not what is important. Faith – and what we do because of it – is what matters. Because *there is no slave or free*.

But I now believe that I was mistaken when I thought that for some reason it mattered what set of chromosomes people are born with. I was willing to ignore the part that says *there is no male and female*, and then vote for only men to be on the list of people who can read the Bible up front on Sunday, or be the treasurer, or be the Sunday school superintendent. Because *there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus*.

And where I feel the most guilt is this: upholding divisions based on gender is hurting a group of people I am supposed to love. I think it can be demonstrated that we are hurting women and girls by not treating them to be equals in faith, equals in service to God – as if God doesn't love certain of us as much as others! There are many examples in the Bible where the firstborn ends up less than the secondborn, like Jacob and Esau. Who was fashioned first out of the dust of the Earth? *Adam*. Who was the next fashioned out of the same building materials and given the same breath of life? *Eve*. Somehow I, as a man, can tell a woman how she can serve God? I realized I was wrong because I chose to have beliefs instead of faith.

Paul is teaching us that it doesn't matter what our genetics are, or our status, or any other type of metric people have come up with. Jesus came to *unite*, not to divide. What matters is our faith. That was a lesson it took me much too long to fully learn.

I got to this point when I realized that I only wanted sons, not daughters. Sure, if you had asked me when my wife was pregnant, I would have said I just wanted a healthy kid, but deep down I was rooting for a boy. Unfortunately, it kind of makes sense to think that way when you look at the world and see how women are treated, and then you come to the safety of our church and see all the restrictions *we* place on women.

And I asked myself, *Is this sexism an example of the love of God? Was this built out of the fruit of the spirit, or is this a tradition of men that I chose to believe?* The more I thought about it, the

more it seems to parallel the racism that has plagued this country since its foundation. I know the slave-masters had all sorts of Bible verses to justify their actions, similar to all the Bible verses that can be used to justify sexism – *none of which exemplifies loving God or our neighbors as our self.*

I recognize the misogyny within myself, that it is wrong, and that I don't want to perpetuate that type of thinking. And I count that as personal growth. I doubted my previous belief, worked out the issue, and grew. This process caused me to grow in my faith and to be more Christlike.

Landing for Repairs

Doubts of all kinds are an inevitable part of our lives. While our first instinct might be to see doubt as a negative one hundred percent of the time, it has a place. And it can be used positively. Contrary to the fear that facing our doubts means we will lose our faith, leaving doubts unaddressed is much more likely to cause that.

To clarify, we should doubt our egos, our pridefulness, the part of us where the lusts of the flesh sprouts out like weeds, the part of us that says, “Me first! I am supreme! I have, and I want more! Look at me!” As a group, we should doubt ourselves when we begin to act like the Scribes and Pharisees who were so quick to interpret the law to justify their selfishness and to condemn others – and so slow to humble themselves and to love their neighbors. Use doubt like the examples of the faithful people in the Bible: to sort out what is God's will versus man's will.

We read about Jesus going through similar types of temptations in Luke 4. He felt the pull towards sin, but he doubted that he should give in to that pull – like a pilot doubts if it's a good idea to do a risky maneuver to get to the destination faster. We should take this example of how Christ dealt with the pull towards sin in his heart and strive to identify and turn from the wrong ways and instead listen to the still small voice that is so easily drowned out. *Love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, and minds, and love our neighbors, whoever they are. Faith, expressed through love* – like Christ did, when he gave his life for our salvation.

In conclusion, doubt is a completely normal feeling to have, and in many cases a good indication of being a well-adjusted and mature person. There are different types of doubts, from the short-term momentary doubt that helps keep us from doing something impulsive, to the long term doubts about difficult topics. There are different subjects to doubt: ourselves, our groups, and our faith. We should resist avoiding our doubts and hiding them – out of shame or habit – and instead trust our conscience to help identify things that are important to investigate. Facing

doubts will oftentimes mean facing our own insecurities, being honest and vulnerable. We need to learn to listen to our hearts and conscience. Our doubts should be sought-out and examined.

Taking a page from aviation, we must recognize how fragile our flight towards righteousness is. Reaching our goals safely won't happen by accident. Doubts are the warning system that let us know it's time to land our spiritual aircraft for repairs, after which we can depart again – safely and improved.