

The Intellectual Side of Doubt

For too many today, intellectual attacks on their faith have gone undefended, their honest questions have remained unanswered, and their faith has crumbled. Author and lecturer Josh McDowell has said, *“The heart cannot rejoice in what the mind rejects.”*

Are there tough answers for the tough questions skeptics ask? Are there honest answers for the honest questions that many, even believing Christians, raise today?

One of the first points with which we need to come to grips is that it is okay to have doubts. Os Guinness has said that the root of doubt is not in our faith but in our humanness. It is both human and universal to doubt. Its origins are rooted in the fall of man. Martin Luther said, *“The art of doubting is easy, for it is an ability that is born with us.”* (*What Luther Says: An Anthology*, ed. Ewald M. Plass, p. 426.)

In the New Testament, doubt is spoken of as a struggle of the believer rather than the unbeliever (*The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown, 1:505). We don't need to feel guilt over our doubts. It is normal for a believer to struggle with doubts. We simply have to deal with them in a mature way.

The question then is, how do we deal with those intellectual doubts that assail the believer? There is a two-fold approach to strengthening our intellectual knowledge of the faith. The first is the study of apologetics and reasons for belief.

I. Study Apologetics

Read 1 Peter 3:15 and answer the following questions?

But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect. (NIV)

- a. What does it mean to “sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts”?
- b. For what are we commanded to always be ready?
- c. The word translated “*defense*” (NASB) or “*answer*” (NIV) comes directly from a courtroom scene in the first century. It is the Greek word *apologia*. Peter pictures the Christian in the witness box, responding to the question, “Why are you a Christian?” How would you answer that question?

“Apologetics” (from *apologia*) is the study of the reasons for belief in Christianity. Theologian Wilbur Smith put it this way: “...a verbal defense, a speech in defense of what one has done or of a truth which one believes...” (*Therefore Stand*, p. 481).

Including 1 Peter 3:15, the word *apologia* is used eight times in the New Testament. Read the following verses and highlight any words or concepts that stick out to you.

Acts 22:1 *Brothers and fathers, listen now to my defense. (NIV)*

Acts 25:16 *I told them that it is not the Roman custom to hand over any man before he has faced his accusers and has had an opportunity to defend himself against their charges. (NIV)*

1 Corinthians 9:3 *This is my defense to those who sit in judgment on me. (NIV)*

2 Corinthians 7:11 *See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done. At every point you have proved yourselves to be innocent in this matter. (NIV)*

Philippians 1:7 *It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart; for whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me. (NIV)*

Philippians 1:16 *The latter do so in love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. (NIV)*

2 Timothy 4:16 *At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them. (NIV)*

F. R. Beattie has written,

Christianity is either EVERYTHING for mankind, or NOTHING. It is either the highest certainty or the greatest delusion . . . But if Christianity be EVERYTHING for mankind, it is important for every man to be able to give a good reason for the hope that is in him in regard to the eternal [truths] of the Christian faith. To accept these [truths] in an unthinking way, or to receive them simply on authority, is not enough for an intelligent and stable faith." (Apologetics, p. 37,38.)

What would you appeal to as the greatest defense of Christianity? Why?

Bernard Ramm has said,

“There is an infinite, all-wise, all-powerful, all-loving God who has revealed Himself by means natural and supernatural in creation, in the nature of man, in the history of Israel and the Church, in the pages of Holy Scripture, in the incarnation of God in Christ, and in the heart of the believer by the gospel.”

How do you think people see God in your life?

Read Matthew 22:37. What is the place of the mind in a Christian's life?

Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” (NIV)

What are you currently doing to develop your mind in order to love God in a greater way?

“Faith in Christianity,” Paul Little writes, “is based on evidence. It is reasonable faith. Faith in the Christian sense goes beyond reason but not against it.” (Know Why You Believe, p. 30.) Do you believe there are reasonable answers for the trustworthiness of Christianity? Why or why not?

The writers of the New Testament wrote either as eyewitnesses of the events they described or recorded eyewitness' firsthand accounts of the events.

Read the following verses and note the writer's relationship to the events themselves.

2 Peter 1:16 *We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. (NIV)*

1 John 1:1-3 ¹ That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched -- this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. ² The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. ³ We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. (NIV)

Luke 1:1-3 ¹ Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, ² just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. ³ Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus. (NIV)

Acts 1:1-3 In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach ² until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. ³ After his suffering, he showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. (NIV)

1 Corinthians 15:6-8 After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born. (NIV)

John 20:30-31 ³⁰ Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. ³¹ But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. (NIV)

The writers of the New Testament also appealed to the firsthand knowledge of their readers or listeners concerning the facts and the evidence about the person of Jesus Christ. In effect, they said “*You also know about these things.*” Read the following:

Acts 2:22 Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. (NIV)

Acts 26:24-28 ²⁴ At this point Festus interrupted Paul's defense. "You are out of your mind, Paul!" he shouted. "Your great learning is driving you insane." ²⁵ "I am not insane, most excellent Festus," Paul replied. "What I am saying is true and reasonable. ²⁶ The king is familiar with these things, and I can speak freely to him. I am convinced that none of this has escaped his notice, because it was not done in a corner. ²⁷ King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do." ²⁸ Then Agrippa said to Paul, "Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?" (NIV)

The Christian faith is an objective faith. That is, it must have an object in which to place faith in order for that faith to be valid. It is faith in Jesus Christ that saves us, not simply "faith in faith."

In light of that, how would you respond to the statement, "It doesn't matter what you believe, as long as you believe it enough"?

John Warwick Montgomery says,

If our 'Christ of faith' deviates at all from the biblical 'Jesus of history,' then to the extent of that deviation, we also lose the genuine Christ of faith. As one of the greatest Christian historians of our time, Herbert Butterfield, has put it: 'It would be a dangerous error to imagine that the characteristics of an historical religion would be maintained if the Christ of the theologians were divorced from the Jesus of history.'" (The Shape of the Past, p. 145)

Why are the "facts" of Christianity important for the believer?

II. Study the Scriptures

I said there is a two-fold approach to bolstering our intellectual knowledge of the Christian faith. The first was the study of apologetics and reasons for belief. The second is our study of the Scriptures themselves.

Some today handle the Word of God in anely and inaccurately. Their interpretations are read into the Scripture rather than drawn out from them. Read 2 Timothy 2:15. How ought we to handle the Word of God?

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth. (NIV)

A “workman” is one who is adequately trained for his task and practices his craft as a life-time occupation. How are your tools for effective Bible study? Do you know how to practically study the Scriptures for yourself?

If not, enroll in a course in Bible Study methods or pick up one of the books listed under the suggested reading section at the end of this chapter.

According to Romans 12:1-2, our minds have become conformed to this world-system and need to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. This happens as we study the Scripture and continually apply its teachings to our lives.

Some people have found that it is best to study the Scripture at a set time each day, perhaps as part of their daily devotions. For others, larger chunks of time throughout the week work best. The point is to set aside time to grow our minds, both in the knowledge of the defense of the faith and the content of our faith found in the Scriptures.

In the space below, set some goals for Bible study. When will you do it? Where will you begin your study? What other books or issues will you study in order to answer your questions and the questions of others?

Conclusion

Doubts can plague us on an intellectual level. The solution to those doubts is knowledge: knowing the answers (that's the study of apologetics) and knowing the Scriptures themselves. Only then will we be equipped to deal with the intellectual side of doubt.

Suggested Reading

Living by the Book, Howard Hendricks (Moody Press)

Guide to Understanding Your Bible, Josh McDowell (Here's Life Publishers)