

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Doubt

John Newton, the great hymn writer, was also (as might be expected) a very astute theologian and a faithful pastor. In his collected works there are hundreds of letters that he wrote to people who sought his advice. In one of these he counsels a poor saint who was beset with doubts. He wrote back, "The doubts and fears you speak of are, in a greater or less degree, the common experience of all the Lord's people, at least for a time; whilst any unbelief remains in the heart, and Satan is permitted to tempt, we shall feel these things. In themselves they are groundless and evil; yet the Lord permits and over-rules them for good. They tend to make us know more of the plague of our own hearts, and feel more sensibly the need of a Saviour, and make his rest (when we attain it) doubly sweet and sure; – and they likewise qualify us for pitying and comforting others. Fear not: only believe, wait, and pray. Expect not all at once. A Christian is not of hasty growth, like a mushroom, but rather like the oak, the progress of which is hardly perceptible, but in time becomes a great deep-rooted tree. If my writings have been useful to you, may the Lord have the praise. To administer any comfort to his children is the greatest honour and pleasure I can receive in this life."¹

Os Guinness in his very helpful book on Doubt points out that people often labor under the notion that doubt is the opposite of faith and is therefore synonymous with unbelief -- this, says Guinness, is a view of faith that is unrealistic and a view of doubt that is unfair. So Guinness asks, "What is doubt and how is it related to faith and unbelief?"

"Our English word *doubt* comes from the Latin *dubitare* which is rooted in an Aryan word meaning 'two.' So we can start by defining our terms like this: to believe is to be 'in one mind' about accepting something as true; to disbelieve is to be 'in one mind' about rejecting it. To doubt is to waver between the two, to believe and disbelieve at once and so to be 'in two minds.'

"This two-ness or double-ness is the heart of doubt and the deepest dilemma it represents. *The heart of doubt is a divided heart.* This is not just a metaphor. It is the essence of the Christian view of doubt, and human language and experience from all around the world also bear it out.

"In English the double-ness of doubt is pictured in phrases such as 'having a foot in both camps.' There are many equivalents in other languages. The Chinese picture of irresolution is humorous as well as graphic. They speak of a person 'having a foot in two boats.' In the Peruvian Andes the Huanuco Quechuas speak of 'having two thoughts,' and the Shipibos further to the east have an expression, 'thinking two things.' In Guatemala, the Kekchi language describes the doubter as a man 'whose heart is made in two,' while the Navajo Indians in the southwestern United States use a similar term, 'that which is two with him.'"²

I. THE BIBLICAL TERMINOLOGY: THE OLD TESTAMENT³

The Hebrew of the Old Testament seems to lack an exact equivalent to our term "doubt," when used in a religious reference. Some have, indeed, understood "doubters," "skeptics" to be meant when the Psalmist, who loves God's law and hopes in his word and delights in keeping his commandments, declares that he "hates them that are of a double mind" (Ps. 119:113, *pasach*). The Jewish Targum reads, "I hate the irresolute." The persons described as irresolute are people whose minds churn with many thoughts and wicked schemes. Thus they waver between the right and the wrong path of life.⁴ Thus it is hypocrites, what we should call "double-faced men," who are meant; and it seems to be hypocrisy, rather than doubt, which is in mind also in 1 Kings 18:21, where a kindred term occurs,

and in 1 Chron. 12:33, Ps. 12:2, where the similar phrase “double heart” (*leb va-leb*) appears, as well as in Hos. 10:2, where the commentators differ as to whether the words *chalaq* are to be translated “their heart is divided,” or, perhaps better, “their heart is smooth,” that is, deceitful.

II. THE NEW TESTAMENT TERMS

In the New Testament, on the other hand, we meet with a series of terms which run through the shades of meaning expressed by our words, perplexity, suspense, distraction, hesitation, questioning, skepticism, shading down into unbelief.

Perplexity is expressed by the verb *eporeo* (Mark 6:20; Luke 24:4; John 13:22; Acts 25:20; 2 Cor. 4:8; Gal. 4:20), with its strengthened compound, *diaporeo* (Luke 9:7; Acts 2:12; 5:24; 10:17), expressing thorough perplexity, when one is utterly at a loss, and the still stronger compound *exaporeo* (2 Cor. 1:8; 4:8), in which perplexity has passed into despair. This perplexity is never assigned in the New Testament to the sphere of religion. Even in such instances as Luke 24:4, where we are told that the women, finding the Lord’s tomb empty, “were perplexed thereabout;” Mark 6:20, Luke 9:6, where Herod’s perplexity over John’s preaching and the subsequent preaching of Jesus and his followers is spoken of; and Acts 2:12, where the extreme perplexity of those who witnessed the wonders of the Day of Pentecost is adverted to, it is not a state of religious doubt but of pure mental bewilderment which is described. The women merely had no explanation of the empty tomb ready, they were at a loss how to account for it; Herod simply found John’s preaching and the reports concerning the preaching and work of Jesus and his disciples inexplicable, he had no theory ready for their explanation; the marvels of Pentecost, before Peter’s explanation of them, were wholly without meaning to their witnesses; and, similarly, in Acts 10:17, Peter was just at a complete loss to understand what the vision he had received could mean, and required a revelation to make it significant to him. It was this state of mind, a state of what we may call objective suspense due to lack of light, which the Jews claimed for themselves when in John 10:24 they demanded of Jesus: “How long dost thou lift up our soul (*ten psuchen hemon aireis*)? If thou art the Christ, tell us plainly.”

Their words would suggest that they were in a state of strained expectation regarding his claims, and that the lagging of their decision was due, not to subjective causes rooted in an evil heart of unbelief, but to a lack of bold frankness on his part. Jesus, in his reply, repels this insinuation and ascribes the fault to their own unbelief. They were not eager seekers after truth, held in suspense by his ambiguous speech: they were men in possession of full evidence, who would not follow it to a conclusion opposing their wishes; they were therefore not perplexed, but unbelieving.

For the doubt of the disgraced mind the New Testament appears to have two expressions, *meteorizesthai* (Luke 12:29; Matt. 14:31; 28:17). This state of mind is superinduced on faith, and is a witness to the faith which lies behind it; only those who have faith can waver or be distracted from it. But the faith to which it witnesses is equally necessarily an incomplete and imperfect faith; only an imperfect faith can waver or be distracted from its firm assurance. Guinness points out that when the word is “used figuratively, it can mean to soar or to lift oneself up, and so to be arrogant in spirit. Or else, because one is lifted up in the air, to be unsettled and therefore restless, anxious, tense and doubtful.

“It describes a state of mind which is the result of an awkward position. Many modern expressions capture this ambivalence, such as being ‘up in the air’ or being ‘hung up.’ When Jesus says to his disciples, ‘You are not to set your mind on food or drink; you are not to worry’ (Luke 12:29 – the only New Testament use of the word), he is saying that God’s care for us as Father means that food and drink are not to be a hang-up, an occasion for doubt and anxiety which constantly keeps us up in the air.”⁵

The exhortation, “Be ye not of a wavering mind,” is appropriately given, therefore, in Luke 12:29, to those who are addressed as “of little faith” (*oligopistoi*), of whom it is the specific characteristic. It is to trust in God’s providential care without carking anxiety as to our food and drink and clothing that the Savior is exhorting his hearers in this context - to fulness of faith, which, according to its definition in Heb. 11:1, is absorbed in the unseen and future in contrast with the seen and present. Those who have full faith will have their whole life hid with God; and in proportion as care for earthly things enters, in that proportion do we fall away from the heights of faith and exhibit a wavering mind. It was a similar weakness which attacked Peter, when, walking, by virtue of faith, upon

the water to come to Jesus, he saw the wind and was afraid (Matt. 14:31); and, accordingly, our Savior addressed him similarly, “O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt (*edistasas*)?” Here, again, is real faith though weak, but a faith that is distracted by the entrance of fear. The same term, and surely with similar implications, is used again and on an even more interesting occasion. When the disciples of Jesus came to the mountain where he had appointed them and there saw their risen Lord, we are told (Matt. 28:17), “They worshiped: but some doubted (*edistan*).” It is this same doubt of imperfect and distracted faith, and not the skeptical doubt of unbelief, that is intended. All worshiped him, though some not without that doubt of the distracted mind which is no more “psychologically absurd” here than in Luke 12:29 and Matt. 14:31. Whence the distraction arose, whether possibly from joy itself, as in Luke 24:41, or from a less noble emotion, as possibly in John 20:25, we do not know. But the quality of doubt resulting from it, although manifesting the incompleteness of the disciples’ faith, was not inconsistent with its reality; and the record of it is valuable to us as showing, along with such passages as Luke 24:37, 41; John 20:25, that the apostles’ testimony to the resurrection was that of convinced rather than of credulous witnesses.

A kindred product of weak faith, the doubt of questioning hesitation, is expressed in the New Testament by the term *dialogismos* (Luke 24:38; Rom. 14:1; Phil. 2:14; 1 Tim. 2:8). Our English word *dialogue* comes from this. It is the nemesis of weakness of faith that it is pursued by anxious questionings and mental doubts. Thus, when Christ appeared to his disciples in Jerusalem, “they were terrified and affrighted, and supposed that they had beheld a spirit” (Luke 24:36), provoking their Master’s rebuke, “Wherefore do questionings arise in your heart?” And in St. Paul’s Epistles, the timid outlook of the weak in faith is recognized as their chief characteristic. This seems to be the meaning of Rom. 14:1, where “he that is weak in faith” is to be received into full Christian brotherhood, but not “for the adjudication of questionings” (cf. the *krineto* of vs. 3 and the *krinon* of vs. 4): here is a man whose mind is crowded with scruples and doubts -- he is to be received, of course, but not as if his agitated conscience were to be law to the community; he is to be borne with, not to be obeyed. The same implication underlies Phil. 2:14, where the contrast between “murmurings and disputings” seems to be not so much between moral and intellectual rebellion, as between violent and timid obstacles in the Christian pathway -- a contrast which appears also in 1 Tim. 2:8. It would seem that those who are troubled with questionings are everywhere recognized as men who possess faith, but who are deterred from a proper entrance into their privileges and a proper performance of their Christian duties by a settled habit of hesitant casuistry, which argues lack of robustness in their faith.

The New Testament term which expresses that deeper doubt which argues not merely the weakness but the lack of faith is the verb *diakrinesthai* (Matt. 21:22; Mark 11:23; Rom. 4:20; 14:23; James 1:6; Jude 22). In James 1:6 the person who doubts is described by the expression *kludoni thalasses* -- tossed around like a cork in rough water.⁶ Wherever this critical attitude toward divine things is found, there faith is absent. The term may be used in contrast to that faith by which miracles are wrought, or in which God is approached in prayer (Matt. 21:21; Mark 11:23; James 1:6); in either case it implies the absence of the faith in question and the consequent failure of the result -- he that “doubteth” in this sense cannot expect to receive anything of the Lord. It may be used of a frame of mind in which one lives his life out in the Christian profession (Rom. 14:23); in this case, the intrusion of this critical spirit vitiates the whole course of his activities -- because they are no longer of faith, and “whatsoever is not of faith is sin.” Or it may be used as the extreme contrast to that fullness of faith which Abraham exhibited in his typical act of faith; and then it is represented as the outgrowth of unbelief (Rom. 4:20). From the full description of its opposite here, and the equally full description of it itself in James 1:6, we may attain a tolerably complete conception of its nature as the critical self-debating habit of the typical skeptic, which casts him upon life like a derelict ship upon the sea, and makes him in all things “double-minded” and “unstable.” Such a habit of mind is the extreme contradiction of faith, and cannot coexist with it; and it is therefore treated everywhere with condemnation -- unless Jude 22 be an exception, and there the reading is too uncertain to justify its citation as such.

CONCLUSION: There are many things that cause us to doubt what we believe. To understand doubt is to have a key to a quiet heart and a quiet mind. How is this so? Guinness, once again, points out that, “It is *what* we doubt and not *how* we doubt that sets the market value of doubting. If the object of our faith were as

elusive as the Loch Ness monster or an inconsequential as whether to have a third cup of afternoon tea, then doubt makes little difference. But since the object of Christian faith is God, to believe or disbelieve is everything. Thus the market value of doubt for the Christian is extremely high. Find out how seriously a believer takes his doubts and you have the index of how seriously he takes his faith. For the Christian, doubt is not the same as unbelief, but neither is it divorced from it. Continued doubt loosens the believer's hold on the resources and privileges of faith and can be the prelude to the disasters of unbelief. So doubt is never treated as trivial."⁷

When it comes to Christianity there are things which are certain. The first of these is the sense of sin and the need for forgiveness. We all know something about an accusing, tormenting conscience, I am sure -- the feeling that we have done wrong and that we want to get rid of that sense of guilt, that unhappiness. We want to feel at rest and at peace. That is the first thing the convicted sinner always feels. The man who has stopped and looked at himself and seen what he has done is a man who is unhappy and who wants to get out of that state of unhappiness. But the true Christian does not stop there. The next step is to see and to hate that terrible thing within us that ever makes us capable of sin. Ah, if you are simply concerned about getting rid of your feeling of guilt and unhappiness and nothing more, I say you are not yet in the truly Christian position. The Christian goes further than that: he realizes this fundamental need of a central sincerity. He sees himself through the eyes of God. He knows he is being read as an open book, and whatever other people may see in him and think of him, he knows that God is reading the thoughts and intents of his heart and everything about him in the very recesses of his life. He knows that his nakedness is open to the eye of Almighty God.

God tells me in His own Word, to believe on His Son the Lord Jesus Christ, and to surrender myself and my life to Him. If I do that, if I acknowledge my sin, if I realize my need of forgiveness and believe that I have it through Christ and His perfect work, if I plead and pray for this new birth and receive it, then I say there are certain things that are going to happen to me. In other words, I mean that what I am about to say is a test. I can imagine nothing more terrible than for a man to go through a long life in this world assuming and imagining that he is a Christian, and then to find at the dread day of judgment that he has never been a Christian at all. These are the solemn words of Jesus Christ Himself: "Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? And in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity" (Matthew 7:22-23). To me (and that is why I am a preacher of this gospel) the most important thing for a man in this life and in this world is to know for certain that he is a Christian.⁸

ENDNOTES

¹ *The Works of John Newton* I (rpt. Banner of Truth, 1985), p. 681.

² Os Guinness, *Doubt* (IVP, 1976), p. 17.

³ The analysis of the Biblical terms are distilled from B. B. Warfield's article on Doubt that appears in his *Collected Shorter Writings* II (P & R, 1971), p. 655ff.

⁴ Avrohom Chaim Feuer, *Tehillim: A New Translation with a Commentary on the Psalms* (Mesorah Publications, 1985), p. 1470.

⁵ Guinness, p. 18.

⁶ J. B. Mayor, *The Epistle of Saint James* (rpt. Klock & Klock, p. 1977), p. 41.

⁷ Guinness, p. 22.

⁸ This last section is distilled from D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Out of The Depths: Restoring Fellowship with God* (Crossway, 1987).