

DOUBT¹

Introduction

This is 'my' subject, and has been for almost all of my life. Many stories could illustrate this: one, from teenage years. I attended young peoples Bible Class at a local church: in the background, enthusiasm for pop music, including Normie Rowe 'It ain't necessarily so ... the things that you're liable to read in the Bible, they ain't necessarily so'. At Bible class one day, amidst discussion, I asked: But what is God? My teacher, who was and is a friend, replied: You can't ask that question. It's not, what is God, but who is God. He proceeded to tell us why we should think of God as a person, not a thing.

But to this day, I continue to ask the question.

The story of questioning as repudiated within the community of faith: Val Webb's book *In defence of doubt* suggests a long history in the church of mistreatment of doubters. She even uses the idea of abuse: where the victim actually feels guilty for their suffering, while the powerful oppressors define the person as in some way out of line.

This is a reflection of Val's own story. In my book, I have a chapter which seeks to gather together her experiences and presentation of the situation of a person who doubts:

You are alone because you do not have faith;
You do not belong, and you have nothing to contribute;
You are wrong because you do not know God.

The 'voice of authority' purports to know all about God, and so all the rest of the people conform to this voice, and anyone who questions is experienced as wrong, threatening the group, and is without faith.

In my own long journey with this issue, I have lived with the conviction that doubt and faith are not opposites, as so often the church and the literature has claimed. Doubt and faith live together not as opposites but (at least potentially) as very good friends. Furthermore, as a pastor, I have seen the deeply destructive impact of the resistance to and repudiation of doubt. I have come to see that the real opposite of faith is fear: and I have come to see that a great deal of what is called strength of faith is often - not always, but often - an expression of vehemence, itself motivated by a need to resist something, of which people are afraid. 'Argument weak, shout here'.

¹ This paper represents Prof. Frank Rees' notes from a talk he delivered to the *Theology and Culture Project* on May 22, 2003. The fuller account can be found in his book *Wrestling With Doubt: Theological Reflections on the Journey of Faith* (Liturgical Press, 2001).

I have lived with the conviction that doubt is a friend, not an enemy, of faith.

This is not a new insight. Many people have known this. But no-one has, I think, been able to show this to people in a way that is theologically convincing, biblically insightful, and connects with personal experience. In other words, many people have arrived at this insight, but without a map of the territory they have crossed. And therefore it is hard to help others to get there, and often hard to feel secure in this new insight when the defenders of an old position attack you.

So I set out to draw something like a theological map.

Two fundamental components: and then a third, some consequences.

1. Analysis of the concept of faith
2. Theological insights which are appropriate to the experience of faith and doubt.

1. OUR IDEAS OF FAITH

Several basic things here:

Faith and belief:

the problems of the English language, with only one verb.
Faithing, as much more than belief.
Identifying faith with belief has many consequences:

Belief is a static situation, of an individual
Belief is inconsistent with doubt
Belief is all-or-nothing.

The question of whether faith means belief that or belief in.

But then we need consider what else faith is: faith is trusting, faith is journeying, faith is doing, feeling, loving, - and faith is a life-long dimension of relationship. Faith is relational and communal, not only individual. And at times faith is something others may have for us, or others may see in us though we do not think we have it.

Finally, I think the Bible seems to indicate that in many situations a faithful response to God includes protest, questioning and overt expressions of doubt. These are part of the journey of faith.

2. WHAT KIND OF GOD IS IMPLIED BY OUR IDEA OF FAITH?

The God who expects or demands a doubtless faith, or the kind of God who invites participation in the journey, or the conversation.

In my research, and in the book, I examined three major approaches to theology which address the problem of doubt and its relation to faith.

1. **Newman:** John Henry Newman spent about 30 years, and more than 20 different attempts in writing a book, trying to explain how faith excludes doubt - as he claimed. His *Essay in aid of a grammar of assent* outlines a philosophical analysis of how we form judgments, how we assent to truths, and his claim is that when we apprehend a proposition and the premises or grounds upon which it is based, a sense within us which he called the 'illative sense' enables us to move from that apprehension to assent.

Furthermore, he maintained that when properly formed, assents are indubitable and are irreversible. If we do come to reverse an assent, that shows that it was not properly an assent in the first place. Newman further held that religious belief, faith, is a response to the apprehension of God's revelation, through the church. Thus, properly formed faith excludes doubt. Newman claimed such faith, 'From the time that I became a catholic, I had not one doubt'.

My critique of this approach is based on a question of the kind of God implied in it. It is a God described as a moral judge and law-giver, who implants in us the knowledge of God and indeed the fear of God. I do not find this to be much like the God of Jesus. Secondly, I find the claim that faith which comes to question or doubt never was faith in the first place impossible to sustain. Newman allowed what he called investigation as a form of reflection upon why we believe what we believe. But he did not allow what he called inquiry: if we believe already, we are not allowed to engage in questioning what is true. This distinction between investigation and inquiry, and the embargo on the latter, I find intellectually dishonest and practically impossible. I don't see how a person can know whether their questions are investigation or inquiry, and I don't see why we should say that an honest questioner is a person without faith.

My basic conclusion about Newman, despite his many insights, is that his notion of faith is defective because his concept of God is defective. In the end, his study does not offer us an adequate concept of God, nor of how this God is engaged with us in the experience we call faith.

2. **Barth:** Karl Barth similarly proposed that faith excludes doubt. But for Barth, this is a theological reality, something about the very nature of God and how God relates to us, not first of all a description on our experience or an analysis of propositional relations.

For Barth, faith is the situation of being 'determined' by the Word of God, understood as an encounter initiated by God and occurring in the present, as

God reveals Godself to people, through the Word. For Barth God is the Word, coming to us in Jesus - a person in history - in the witness of the scripture and in the event of preaching.

In faith, which contrasts with religion, people are gathered into the revelatory event in such a way that their response of thanksgiving, praise and service is both a chosen response and yet is itself shaped by that very revelatory act. Barth's idea of faith is very much encompassed by his strong doctrine of God. But therein too is its weakness. In short, his God speaks in a monologue: though Barth makes much of the theme of partnership, his idea of faith does not allow the partners a voice, much less the right to question and doubt.

In *Evangelical Theology* Barth writes about doubt as a threat to theology. The complexity here is that a form of doubt is essential to theology, but this form of doubt, like Newman's investigation, asks only of the doctrines of the faith: in what sense is it true, but not: Is it true?

My contention is that Barth was right to see that the character of faith and its relation to doubt must be understood through the medium of our relationship with God, and that the doctrine of God is the central issue here; but Barth's own doctrine was not sufficiently relational to embrace the dynamics of lived experience of faith and doubt.

3. **Tillich:** The third theological framework I studied was that of Paul Tillich, who sought to embrace doubt as an essential element in the life of faith, and to allow for this reality within his very concept of God. For Tillich, faith is the state of being ultimately concerned.

But when he set this out in detailed he explained that this very idea is ambiguous. For to have faith is to be concerned, ultimately, about something or someone who for us is ultimate: but there is always the possibility that this someone or something is in fact not the genuinely ultimate. We may mistake the penultimate for the ultimate. In Tillich's own life, he saw how the state, in Nazi Germany, had become an idol, a false representation of the ultimate. The potential for idolatry must always be included in our theological frameworks.

Along with this, Tillich's other great idea was his conviction that all reality, not just something called 'the sacred', participates in the being of God, what he called the power of being, or the ground and abyss of all being. So Tillich developed a theological system in which every theological idea and doctrine was interpreted as a symbol, which more, or less, effectively participates in and mediates to us the presence of God and the gifts of God.

This is a bit complex, but for Tillich the most effective symbols are those which both relate us to the reality they symbolise and which also show us that they, the symbol, are not the whole of that reality. So we might say that the bible is an

effective symbol if it both shows us the word of God, thus relating us to God and yet also at the same time it shows us that it, the Bible, is not God.

On the basis of these ideas Tillich held that doubt is a necessary and structural element in all faith. Without doubt, faith becomes idolatry.

The basic, critical difficulties I found with this approach are that the idea of God and faith we find in Tillich's system need a bit more teasing out. We need a bit more explanation of how doubt can be 'a structural element' in faith: what this actually means in lived experience; and we need a greater sense of what all this has to do with the God of Jesus, the God of the Bible.

3. CONSEQUENCES: MY CONSTRUCTIVE RESPONSE.

a. Critique of the idea of revelation or Word of God: always understood in terms of statements to be believed or commands to be obeyed.

The Word of God as questions:

Examples: where are you?
Where is your brother, what have you done?
Who asked you to come trampling my courts with your
festivals and smoked offerings?
Is there no balm in Gilead?
Have you not known, have you not heard?
Answer me, as a human being ...

Who do you say I am?
Do you have any bread?
Why do you seek the living among the dead/

These are genuine questions. They suggest a God who invites response, and thus the idea of the divine conversation:

God as inviting creativity: a context for conversation

God as embodying and exploring the conversation:

God as evoking consensus: exploring ways to include diversity, discover mutuality.

The divine conversation includes protest: Moses, on behalf of the people; Jeremiah: you have seduced me.

Doubt in the New Testament: not unbelief, but fear, or failure to engage in genuine participation. Half-heartedness. The integrity of response is seen as faithful, even when it may include unbelief.

The challenge of the Canaanite women, to Jesus.

The challenge of Jesus' own doubt.

The inclusion of Thomas, and 'some who doubted' in the resurrection stories and the commissioning of the church.

What kind of faith community includes doubt?

the hospitality of the conversation and the journey;

resistance to the fearful vehemence;

strength in the face of oppression: some things do require a stand;

patience with unknowing - and invitation to exploration;

leadership which is secure in difference and incompleteness.

Frank Rees

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