

DOUBT

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How utterly disheartening it is when you are in the thick of serious questions and doubts to be told that you should not be questioning and doubting. If you're in the middle of a storm, it's no help to be told that you should not be there. What you then need is a helping hand, a sharing mind. And the more important the questions are to you, the more urgent will be your desire for clarity, proper consideration, and decision.

When we were children we did not have to be taught to accept what our parents and teachers said. There was no other alternative but to accept. They were there first. But we grow up and we learn more than we knew as children. We begin to have the problem of sorting out the answers we learned and even the questions we should now be asking. This produces more questions and, most likely, confusion and frustration. No one who thinks at all gets through this stage of life without doubting.

At this stage, the people who think they know every answer, or worse still, every question, are the ones who may be able to help us the least. People who have gone through an experience similar to ours a long time ago, and who have now found working answers to their questions, may have forgotten how hard-won their conclusions and attitudes were. It's easy once you've found a working answer to problems which were once important to us and forget or overlook the process of struggle that led up to our present positions. It is easy then to be unsympathetic. That happens when one has become very certain of the answer one has attained.

There is, of course, a very different attitude. Having experienced a struggle, more or less intense, to achieve one's present position, one can then reflect on that process. It becomes obvious on reflection that others who have achieved some certainty through the process of doubting have also had tensions, struggles, opposition. Realising that is often the case, one may be ready to be sympathetic to them, and willing to give support and help as it is needed.

Those who have not gone through what we go through in this period simply live in a different world from us, and speak to us in a language which does not connect. We hear the words and see the concern. We know their affection and appreciate it. Yet sometimes the very finality and placidity with which we are told what they believe what their new attitudes and positions are disarms us. Their position differs from ours and is considered unsatisfactory. It may even, if we are deeply troubled by dogmatism, lead us to reject not only the answer that but also the very quest in which we are participating. It may even lead to alienation. Fortunately sometimes respect and even affection can survive the emergence of drastic differences of belief. This is a gesture of despair, but quite an understandable one.

To those who have difficulty finding people who will treat their questions seriously and with understanding, I say: 'Do not be put off from the quest for truth and for life. Keep asking. Keep searching. And try, meanwhile, to be loving. If you

don't appear to be understood, then turn the tables by trying, as far as possible, to be understanding.'

It might help if I made an explicit distinction for you to think about. It is one thing to ask questions about what faith means. It is another thing to give up the faith.

Because you have questions about the faith does not mean at all that you are giving up the faith. Do not let anybody persuade you that it does. If you are alert you will have serious questions. If your faith is vital and healthy, it will give rise to inquiry, to careful thought, to examination of answers you did not question as a child. One of the emancipating discoveries you can make is that Christian faith is big enough to permit the believer to live with questions, and to go on living with questions.

To some questions there simply is no intellectually satisfying answer. For example, I have yet to read an intellectually satisfying answer to the problem of suffering. Indeed I do not believe that one is possible. There will always be room to doubt the goodness of God. I believe that God is good. But my faith in God does not depend upon the answer to this problem being satisfying to my mind. This does not mean of course that I shouldn't seek the very best explanation I can get.

While to some questions there is no finally satisfying answer, there is an answer to the mystery of life--the answer of faith in Jesus as Lord. When Jesus is found, then the process of inquiry and of questioning is put into a context where it has both significance and direction.

Life is not God's reward for cleverness in solving problems. It is a gift he offers us because we need it. When we accept and live out of the grace he gives, joy is larger than frustration.

How do you mark off what is beyond doubt from what you may doubt, and what you must doubt, what is indubitable from what may be doubted? Why do you not doubt if you feel you should? There is no virtue in resolving, 'I will not doubt'. you maintain a belief because no alternative has yet been offered to you or come to your attention. You have asked questions and may be in the process of finding answers that provide you with satisfaction. Questioning is not doubting, but it is often a pathway that leads us to revise our understanding, to revise our beliefs. But you maintain a belief or set of beliefs because it is comfortable to be accepted by other believers. You may forget that life and understanding become richer as new perspectives emerge. But guidance is often needed even if it is not sought.

We have distinguished faith from belief. We distinguish 'the faith' from beliefs held within its context. Because you have questions about the faith does not mean that you are giving up the faith. Do not let anybody persuade you that it does. If you are alert you will have serious questions. If your faith is vital and healthy, it will give rise to inquiry, to careful thought, to examination of answers you did not question as a child, or have not questioned since. One of the emancipating discoveries you can make is that Christian faith is big enough to permit the believer to live with questions, and to go on living with questions.

