Liberty University
DigitalCommons@Liberty University

Faculty Publications and Presentations

Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary and Graduate School

2010

Q&A: Religious Doubt

Gary R. Habermas
Liberty University, ghabermas@liberty.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/lts_fac_pubs

Part of the Biblical Studies Commons, Comparative Methodologies and Theories Commons, Ethics in Religion Commons, History of Religions of Eastern Origins Commons, History of Religions of Western Origin Commons, Other Religion Commons, and the Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons

Recommended Citation
Habermas, Gary R., "Q&A: Religious Doubt" (2010). *Faculty Publications and Presentations.* Paper 345.
http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/lts_fac_pubs/345

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary and Graduate School at DigitalCommons@Liberty University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications and Presentations by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Liberty University. For more information, please contact scholarlycommunication@liberty.edu.

Religious Doubt

Question: I was wondering if you would provide some resources in terms of crisis counseling.

Answer: Quite frankly, I am not qualified to address any questions from a psychiatric, psychological, or even from a professional counseling perspective. I approach the subject of religious doubt from a pastoral perspective, having gone through doubt myself for over ten years. I have also had many discussions with those who have suffered similarly. Think of my advice as one person sharing experiences with another. And sorry, but even here, just from a letter or series of letters, I can only make broad suggestions that are too often no more than guesses.
I would recommend that you consult the appropriate authorities in each of these areas. For popular reading, good books are always helpful. I'd highly recommend books by William Backus, such as: (with Marie Chapian) Telling Yourself the Truth (Bethany House, 2000) and by Backus, Telling the Truth to Troubled People: A Manuel for Christian Counselors (Bethany House, 1985).

Question: Could a person really and truly be a Christian and yet struggle with doubts off and on her entire life? I have several questions: How much do "feelings" (like my loudly-beating heart) matter? Could my heart/emotions be deceiving me? And should I keep moving forward even when I don't feel like it and even when I wonder where I am?

Answer: Sure, in my opinion, it's not only possible for believers to have the same kinds of questions that you express, but it's also very, very common. In fact, it's almost impossible to avoid them! This especially pertains to the assurance-type of issues that you describe. In my experience with this subject for over 30 years, virtually every believer goes through such issues at some time. Regarding our emotions, they are God-given, they can be wonderful, and they should be enjoyed. So we don't deny them. However, when it comes to answer our questions, we must all learn immediately that our feelings must not be allowed to dictate what we believe. In other words, enjoy your wonderful emotional times and be prepared to work through the rough times. But whether our emotions are positive or negative, my point is that they have their place. So when we deal with doubts, salvation, etc., we should never rely on our emotions either one way or the other. Once you've decided in favor of Christianity, yes, I think there is virtue in learning to keep moving ahead even when we are confused. Scripture is clear that it's all about where we are in our hearts. Hopefully, the clouds will clear and you'll see that, by God's grace, you were on the path all the time!

Question: What is your advice when I have doubts like, "This Christian stuff is all just pie-in-the-sky wishful thinking"? This doubt is the worst--that it's all been made up to give humans comfort. Surely this isn't the case?

Answer: To me, this is a fine example of the "What if?" question. It is a very frequent indicator that your question is emotional in nature. Why? For one reason, because you have not found any new evidence in support of your doubts. Rather, you are basically asking, "What if Christianity is not true?" If I'm correct that this species of doubt is usually emotional in nature, then piling up more evidence probably will not solve it. As long as we keep asking, "What if?" questions, we can always trump any evidence whatsoever simply by saying, "Oh yeah? But what if....?" I hope you see what I mean. So you have to break the emotional train of thinking.

Question: How can one know *for certain* that any cherished belief is true? Is there a difference between belief (faith) and absolute certainty?

Answer: I don't know for sure without asking further questions, but these questions that sound factual are typically emotional in nature. Certain personality types feel like they need total assurance before they can rest. When it comes to those beliefs that we desire the most, ironically, these are the very ones which, when we get close to them, we think that if we don't have 100% proof, then we cannot be sure of it. That usually indicates other than chiefly factual concerns. You can decide whether or not this pertains to your own questions. There are genuinely factual questions, too, but they are satisfied when there are decent answers, rather than continuing the "What if?" approach.

Question: I am struggling to know if my own repentance is sincere since I often go right back and sin again. Am I being genuine? I feel like I may have moved too far from God's grace.

Answer: Your question seems to include some volitional elements. If you are going back to the sin over and over, one might wonder if you are more committed to eternal life with the Lord or to the sin itself. Which do you want more? Sometimes we have to dictate strongly to both our emotions and our will. For example, you can ask yourself, "What I want to know is, am I committed to the Lord right now, today, this very minute, or not??"
Almost all Christians go through tough times with their will. So we must be vigilant every minute. I'd be concerned, too, if I kept bouncing back & forth; this could be a crucial time for you. Here is a very crucial consideration: the New Testament has some very serious things to say about those who check out the Gospel, get close, & then walk away (Heb. 6:4-8). Likewise, there are very strong warnings against willful sinning (Heb. 3:12-13; 10:26-39). There are a number of interpretations of these passages, but the seriousness seems obvious. I'd encourage you strongly to walk the Lord's path.

Question: Do you ever doubt that God exists? Why or why not? If you don't doubt, I imagine there is something beyond all of your studying & hard work on the Scriptures which clinches your belief. You don't have to answer if you don't want to but I'm interested to hear your perspective.

Answer: Do I still doubt? I would have to say no, not really. Questions arise briefly from time to time, as I think they do with believers & unbelievers alike, but I don't go through the doubt process & have not for many, many years. I really praise God for that, too!
How did it get "cured"? The relief came from several angles, but I think by far the key thing is that I realized that I was looking for an answer in the wrong place. While the study of evidences is important, especially since they solve some really major issues, I also observed that I needed more than the evidences alone. Since factual doubt that goes unsolved often progresses to emotional issues, we have to learn how to handle our feelings, too. If it reaches the more serious volitional ("I don't care") stage, it is sometimes very difficult to gain back the searching spirit that you have now. With volitional doubts, you might feel burned out & you may not want to keep thinking about religious subjects.
In all of this, we need to carefully monitor what we tell ourselves since this is perhaps the single most crucial thing that often hurts the most. In other words, the interpretation that we place on things is worse & more painful than the reality itself. So we need to change what we are telling ourselves about the problem. When we repeat things like, "God probably doesn't even exist," followed by, "then life would be meaningless." Or if we say "God doesn't really care about me," these comments hit us very hard, both since we are denying our central desires and because these statements are so emotionally charged. Thinking we would never lie to ourselves, we might believe these thoughts. After we believe them, they may produce very painful consequences in our lives.
So I had to begin listening to what I was telling myself. Then I had to go back to the evidence & proclaim the truth to myself in place of the untrue statements (as in Phil. 4:8). When we tell ourselves these truths, we also change. This time the doubt & pain begin to subside.

Question: Why didn't Jesus just appear in the Twentieth Century? And if Christianity is true, why doesn't God perform more miracles, like maybe in the middle of an atheist meeting, or in public, so that more people will believe in him? Why doesn't he do it? Why doesn't God respond more?

Answer: I think there are many reasons why Jesus doesn't appear in the Twentieth Century, or why there is not even more evidence than we already have. We find that God gives us plenty of evidence to believe, but not enough to force us to believe. In other words, the evidence is there for anyone who wants to check it out, but not enough to make it so obvious that God is virtually twisting arms. He wants those who want or desire to come to him. Still, there are many signs that God is at work today. I can't unpack this in a detailed email discussion, but here are some things I've said before: I think that there are many indications in the world today of supernatural activity, even if we just considered those that have been published in medical journals or in other trustworthy places.

1. For example, there have been several major studies of answers to prayer, even a double- blind experiment where the conclusion as stated in the medical journal was that the results were most consistent with prayer offered in a Judeo-Christian setting.
2. Further, there have been some rather incredible, documented reversals of terminal illnesses in the presence of prayer. A few of these cases were immediate reversals. For example, two patients had serious cancer diagnoses, one of which was a terminal liver cancer case with inoperable cancer throughout the person's body, who was given perhaps only weeks to live. Both were prayed for regularly, and afterwards their tumors showed absolutely no cancer cells, even though the same tumors were previously biopsied (even more than once) as clearly being cancerous. We're not talking about some crazy religious claims here, but cases that have been experienced in the medical community. Both of these persons are doing fine after almost two years—both without any cancer in their tumors.
3. Many well-evidenced near-death experiences have been published in other medical journals, especially where the near-death individual reports something from some distance away that can be objectively verified or falsified. Some of these patients registered no heart or brain activity for very long periods of time. Please note again that I am basically only speaking of cases where there are rather incredible data--a fair number published in medical journals, for example.

Something else to consider is that a clinical psychologist and I have done some careful surveying and many (if not most) examples of doubt and rejection of God arise for emotional rather than rational reasons. So often you have to ask what the persons were feeling rather that what they were thinking. Emotional uncertainty seems to be far more common than rational rejection. So you really need to know what happened in the person's life, if they are angry at God, and so on. This applies to both Christians and non-Christians alike; almost everyone seems to do it at some time. If you want to do some reading on this, I have a website being put up now where you might be able to research this topic. More items are due to be loaded soon (www.garyhabermas.com). If you look on the left side, under "Online Resources" and then under the next category, "Books," you can find the book Dealing with Doubt. If you are interested in this subject of doubt, I'd recommend Chapter 2 on "Identifying Doubt" and Chapter 4 on "Emotional Doubt."

Question: I worked through a Bible Study that taught that emotions should not be given a major role in knowing God's will. Peace is an emotion, isn't it? Most preachers I have heard say that when you are in God's will there will be an indescribable peace. Which is correct? Also can you have fear and it disguise peace? Does that make sense?

Answer: My short answer is that, in my opinion, peace is not an emotion. It is a calm, settled state of mind that comes from the choices we make, from our volition. Understanding the cognitive side of influencing our will and how we speak truth to ourselves goes a long way towards answering his question, I think. For popular resources, see William Backus and Marie Chapian, Why Do I Do What I Don't Want to Do? (Bethany House, 1984) and Backus' Finding he Freedom of Self-Control (Bethany House, 1987).

Question: I saw you on the John Ankerberg Show talking about the "what if" doubts. You said they usually indicate the presence of emotional doubts. What can a person do against these doubts? I also have these "what if" doubts. Since I'm an anxious person, I simply get these "what if" doubts, which always go hand in hand with fear. When you get a "what if there is no God" fear, logic seldom helps. Does this mean that my faith is inferior? Many Christians simply tell me stuff like "just don't doubt" but I think they cannot even relate to me. Others have told me that I'm not even born again when I get these doubts.

Answer: That you tend to be an anxious person most likely says a lot about why you doubt. And people simply telling you not to doubt certainly doesn't work, either, just as you say! In most cases, as I explained on the programs, the best option is to change the things you are telling yourself, since they are most likely causing a lot of your issues. You're also right that it is not an issue of having more evidence, because as long as you can "What if" something, you will probably worry in spite of the evidence, no matter how good it is. Fear usually trumps reasons. In my opinion, no, this does not necessarily mean that someone's faith is inferior or even non-existent. Doubt is not necessarily the opposite of faith. Virtually all Christians ask questions at some time. They may simply have different questions than you do. Your last paragraph is very insightful and is accurate on how doubt often works. So you deal with the worry, not with the evidence. Learn to tell yourself the truth about the evidences, your faith, and so on. Every time you begin to doubt, you must jump in and say very forcefully to yourself something like: "This is garbage and I'm not going here. It is a baseless objection, and is refuted by the evidence." Generally, the more often and forcefully you react in this or a similar manner, you at least get some control of the fear you seem to be causing yourself.

Question: I have been to numerous sorts of churches, such as Baptist, Catholic, Lutheran, Methodist, Pentecostal, etc. With all these denominations, how do we know who teaches correct doctrine, especially about salvation? And I may have asked this, but what is salvation biblically? With all the confusion over denominations, who can say Joseph Smith didn't restore the true church?

Answer: The key here is to concentrate on central maters that really make a difference. Orthodox Christianity, whatever church government or other form it takes, shares the center of Christianity, including the Deity, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ--what we call the Gospel. The New Testament calls upon everyone to respond in faith to the Person about whom these doctrines are true—the biblical Jesus Christ. Jesus taught that what people do with him in light of these facts determines where they spend eternity. I think that Bible-believing churches usually separate over other things--geographical locations, how we worship, what type of church government we have, etc. But ask about the resurrection, for example, and all Bible-believing Christians come together at that point. Why is this so? Because, among other things, this is both what the Bible teaches as well as where the evidence is. So begin at the center of Christian theology and work out from there. Attend a church that is closest to the teaching that we find in the New Testament. In my view, the specifically Mormon scriptures are further away than most. I think your question is, again, a matter of where the evidence is found. If the evidence is with the Mormons, fine. But if not, why move in that direction? I think it is very clear that the Mormon case is highly problematic on the basis of the evidence alone. During my questioning days, I checked out the Mormon claims in some details, visited their facilities in Salt Lake City and reading their materials. Even though I was very open to it, I had to reject the possibility that Joseph Smith received revelation from God, strictly on the basis of their own claims and lack of evidence.

Question: Every time I begin to think about religion, I think it's a matter of my feelings alone. I sometimes think that that's all Christians have—good feelings. What do you say about that?

Answer: The question of whether Christianity is simply a matter of emotions all depends on whether the most crucial beliefs--such as the Deity, death, and resurrection of Jesus--are linked to history, and therefore true. I maintain that there is such a firm historical basis for each of these that, even if I use only the facts that most liberal and even atheist scholars believe, I still have enough evidence to show that these doctrines are true! I can make suggestions on what to read or we can talk about this if you wish.

Question: How does it feel to be saved? Is it simply the feeling of true happiness? Is it a feeling that you are happy without having to do things that you regret later or feel bad about? Or is it the feeling that the problems of life are so petty?

Answer: Being saved and knowing it can be very peaceful. But peace isn't an emotion and our emotions can be very tricky. For example, they can change from moment to moment. So we absolutely need to base our salvation on facts that we can check up on, not just on good feelings or faith for faith's sake, etc. Faith does need to be exercised, but on a sure foundation. However, in the case of the New Testament, it's not so much that we believe in the historical facts themselves, but in Jesus Christ, the One about whom these facts are true. In short, our faith goes in the Person of Jesus Christ rather than in the facts per se.

Question: My question is whether or not it is possible that we may actually experience the true, living God today? I realize that God is a Spirit, and that the vast majority of our experiences of him are going to have to be described in "spiritual" terms. But what evidence is there that God is still alive and dealing with us today? I don't mean evidences from past history, and so on. How do we know that God is really interacting with us right now, regularly?

Answer: My response would be that we have at least three levels or types of indicators that God interacts personally with us today. I move here from the general to the specific.

1) As you mentioned, there are the general indications that everyone has, like beauty, love, the haunting face, or memories. A very good but even more personal sign is provided by our own conscience. That God expects me to be obedient is more personal. Another is C.S. Lewis' joy argument, which is one of the very best. Lewis' concept of joy, in particular, shows that God woos everyone, believers and unbelievers alike.

2) There are much more evidential cases which indicate that God works in individual lives. More explicitly, I am referring to well-evidenced reports from others, but which we may have never witnessed for ourselves. For example, a) incredible healings, b) non-healing answers to prayer like a double-blind experiment that has been published in a medical journal, c) experiences with angels, d) experiences with demons, e) incredibly well-evidenced near-death experiences (NDEs). On a more personal note, in some of these NDEs we may wonder about someone who reports that they stood next to Jesus and experienced the most fantastic love ever, and wanted to go back immediately instead of living the rest of their lives here on earth! f) In dozens of very interesting cases, God seems to have paved the way on the mission field by some very incredible means, before the Gospel came to particular people groups, and so on. Please note that I basically only collect cases that are accompanied by some rather impressive data. A fair amount of these items has been written up in medical journals, for example.

Then we have category
3), where we have experienced God personally, either in our own lives or in another person/situation with which we were involved. Initially, it might be argued that the more evidence I have for cases in category #2, the less numbers I specifically need here. (However, having several good ones here would still be nice!) Basically, this is because #3 is simply a personalization of #2. I have found that most of us simply forget, ignore, or dismiss cases from our own lives, sometimes because we judge ahead of time that they don't or can't happen, at least not to me. So we may ignore the only examples that we have!! For instance, my wife and I kept a prayer log for two years and we found that about 67% of our prayers were answered. Further, I kept a side category for what I termed "impossible prayer requests." These were the ones that I thought would never be answered. But a whopping 60% of these "impossible" requests were even answered! But to illustrate my thought above, if you asked me to name just a few of these, of all these dozens of answers to prayer, I can only remember one without consulting my list! But why is it that I will always remember two or three cases where I didn't get the answer I wanted for a far longer time than I will ever remember any number of answered prayers?!?! Just try it--it's crazy!

Having said all this, I think many, if not most, Christians, especially those who have been saved for years and are active in following and serving God, probably have many examples in category #3. If we wrote them down we could presumably do a much better job remembering them. For example, how many a) non-healing answers to prayer could we list that we have ever been a part of? Because I am pretty critical, I don't think I have many to report, but I still have several that you would be hard-pressed to explain naturally. For example, one afternoon during my skeptical days I challenged God to knock down a particular tree behind my house, and it happened that very same night! And only that tree fell down! But do you know what? It made no difference to me regarding my doubts! b) Healings? We had a close family friend last year who was diagnosed with a very, very serious type of cancer. He was biopsied several times. We all prayed regularly for him and when he went for surgery, they cut out the tumor. But they could not find a single cancer cell!! A doctor told me that while strange things happen with cancer, biopsied tumors don't lose their cancer cells! This is especially the case when biopsies were done more than once. Then right after that we had another case that was actually far more evidential!! I'll be glad to tell you about it some day. From all we can tell, including multiple tests from an oncologist, a terminal cancer patient who probably had only a very few weeks (or just days) to live experienced a spontaneous remission!

Then, what about non-miraculous convictions of God's presence? Were you ever positive that c) God convicted you of a sin? d) Did God ever give you "time out" for something? Hebrews 12:7 says that this sort of heavenly chastening shows that you are God's child!! e) Did you ever use a spiritual gift and have someone tell you that you ministered to them in a particular way? Every one of these is a love letter straight from God to you. How many indications does it take to show that God may be at work in your life today? I like what C. S. Lewis says in Mere Christianity--any time we prayed for something that happened, we shared in the answer. How about any of the other categories in #2? It seems to me that we have plenty of reasons to think that God is alive, doing well, and still touches lives today.