

Doubt

I. Kinds of Christian Doubt

- (1) Intellectual: Questions about issues related to Scripture and doctrines of Christianity.
- (2) Emotional: Fear and anxiety that Scripture and key doctrines of Christianity may be false; or a vague feeling that Christianity isn't true.
- (3) Volitional: a willful attitude of unbelief and skepticism. An unwillingness to believe certain Scriptures or Christian doctrines.
 - a. It is this form of doubt that the Bible condemns. People who see God's glory in nature, the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the Scriptures that testify about Him have good warrant for faith.¹ But it is easy to succumb to non-Christian peer pressure and become skeptical about certain Christian doctrines (even sub-consciously). This is what it means to be "double-minded."
 - b. It is good to understand different belief systems, but be wary of trying to empathize with non-believers by trying too hard to "see" things from their skeptical / unbelieving perspective. "Seeing" by the Holy Spirit is what makes you a Christian.

II. Implications for Evangelism

- (1) Areas of unbelief about one's worldview arise when it doesn't seem to answer crucial questions as well as another.
- (2) Conversion comes from seeing the glory of another worldview that outshines your own.
- (3) We should not simply ask a non-Christian to adopt an attitude of skepticism and unbelief about his worldview. Instead we should encourage him to honestly consider key questions, and read (or listen to) the Gospel / Scripture with an open mind, so that God opens his eyes to see God's glory outshining that of his former belief system.

¹ In addition to other evidences for Christianity, the assurance of the Holy Spirit is a defeater of any defeater offered against the Gospel, i.e., no matter how strong an objection against the Gospel appears, the self-authenticating glory of God will always appear stronger if we pay attention to it (through Scripture reading, prayer, worship, fellowship with believers, etc).

The Hiddenness of God

Perhaps the kind of character that God wants to form in us would not be possible if God did not keep his epistemic distance. If humans saw God's heavenly glory, they could not help worshipping Him. But God's true worth to us is revealed by how we seek, love and trust him when conditions are difficult and his presence is not obvious. If God's goal is to test and deepen our love for him, then hard times are necessary. Just as separation while dating can reveal and deepen love, hard times in faith when God seems hidden, can do the same.

God's goal is not belief *per se*, its saving faith which involves trusting God though He is unseen and choosing to earnestly seek Him in spite of opposition (Heb 11:1, 3; Prov 25:2). The more room for doubt and unbelief about God's existence and goodness, the greater the faith that can be exercised. The easier (and more tempting) God is to ignore, the more His value is shown when people attend to Him. Trials test and prove the strength of faith. This goal causes God to act quite different from how He would if He was just trying to make His existence undeniable. His actions may not be effective at coercing universal belief, but they may be very effective at creating the conditions for saving faith and other virtues that God wants. God is not interested in performing party tricks so we can say, "Wow, that's amazing! I guess God really does exist!" and then continue to live a sinful, self-centered life. God does what is necessary to make his reality clear enough to those willing to surrender their lives to him, but he makes it relatively easy for those who wish to disbelieve in Him to do so. When God does makes his existence virtually undeniable to someone (like the apostle Paul), it is often to prepare him or her for special service and intense trials.

If visions of Jesus were universal and expected, they may not cause more people to love and obey Him. For sinners, familiarity breeds contempt. While everyone would believe that God exists, perhaps many would resent having to obey God and try to manipulate Him (and become bitter when He didn't do what they wanted). Under such conditions, continued visions would not surprise and endear us to God, but might further harden our hearts against Him or cause us to take Him for granted and not fear Him. That is what happened to the first humans and the Hebrews in the wilderness. Revival history demonstrates this as well. Perhaps much of humanity would eventually be in a state of conscious rebellion against God (like demons). Thus, for the time being, perhaps God has limited the amount and extent of supernatural encounters in the physical world, so that *more* people will be saved, not less.

The Unreached

- (1) God has given humanity a general revelation of himself. The eternal power and divine nature of a Creator can be clearly seen in creation making His existence highly plausible (Rom 1:19-20). His goodness is displayed in His provision and patience with us (Rom 2:4; Acts 14:17). His moral law can be known because it is written on our hearts (Rom 2:14-15). Therefore, we know deep down that we ought to seek our Creator wholeheartedly in order to honor, thank and obey Him. If people did so, God would reveal Himself clearly and open their understanding to find Him (Jeremiah 29:13).
- (2) Yet, no one truly seeks God. All have turned away (Rom 1:18-21, 3:9-20, 23).
- (3) Our rejection of God has separated us from His Spirit, resulting in darkened understanding, twisted emotions, disordered desires, and causing us to become slaves (addicts) to sin under the power of Satan. Compared to how we were intended to be, we are all psychopaths (Rom 1:21-32; 6:20; 7:14-25; 8:5-8; 1 Cor 2:14; Eph 2:1-3).
- (4) The ultimate consequence of rejecting God is eternal separation from him in hell.
- (5) God wants all people to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth (1 Tim 2:3-4). God does not take pleasure in the death of the wicked (Ezek 18:23).
- (6) Therefore, God has sent human messengers throughout the world to announce his salvation, along with his Spirit to convict people regarding sin, righteousness and judgment (Matt 28:18-20; John 16:8). God has arranged each person's circumstances so that in response to the Holy Spirit, some people would seek, reach out and find him, though he is not far from each person. In Him we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:22-28).
- (7) God's salvation is available through faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ (John 3:16; Acts 20:21; Rom 3:21-26; 5:1-2, Rom 10:9-15; 2 Cor 5:18-21).
- (8) God's determination of who will have this second opportunity to respond to him by hearing the gospel is rooted in his sovereign plan and His desire to spread the gospel by sinful, finite human messengers (Matt 11:27; Acts 13:48; Romans 9).
 - a. Analogy of a college professor whose students refuse to pay attention in class throughout the semester. As a result they are all failing.
 - b. The professor decides to give his students another chance by offering a special tutoring session before the final exam. He informs several students and tells them to spread the word to the rest of the class.
 - c. Even if some students do not hear about the tutoring session, it is not the professor's fault that they failed the class.

So are People living after the time of Christ who never hear the Gospel necessarily lost?

- a. It may be that those who have never hear of Christ are in the same situation as the people in the Old Testament (a time of ignorance for unreached Gentiles, Acts 17:30-31). If they respond to the Holy Spirit's drawing with repentance and faith in the Most High God, trusting in Him to forgive and make them righteous, and seeking to worship and obey Him, they will be saved (Rom 2:7-11). This doesn't mean that they naturally obey or seek God on their own initiative, but rather that they can respond to the conviction of the Holy Spirit with faith in the general gospel (without conscious knowledge of Jesus). Most cultures have a concept of a supreme creator God in their religion. Even if they don't, each person can know God's existence from general revelation (the need for an ultimate cause / creator / designer, and judge of moral conscience) and the witness of the Holy Spirit. However, full salvation in the New Testament is a relationship with Jesus the Messiah as one's Lord and Savior that gives Spirit-filled life in the Messianic Kingdom. It includes a conscious knowledge of God's plan of salvation that Jesus is the one who atones for sin, defeats evil, heals suffering and reveals the Father perfectly. This form of salvation is only available to Christians (see analogy in C.S. Lewis *The Last Battle*).
 - b. If no one responds to God's general conviction with saving faith (at least since the time of Christ) then the only way humans actually respond with saving faith is through exposure to Christ (Rom 10:9-15). Since God is committed to using human messengers, the result is that some will not hear given the slow spread of the gospel due to human sin and finitude.
 - c. God may wait to send missionaries until the "fullness of time" when He knows the gospel will be accepted by some and not completely rejected, leading to the establishment of a church.
- Regardless of the uncertainties surrounding the unreached, we are commanded to make disciples of Jesus Christ from all ethnic groups. Regarding the judgment of those who never hear, we can be sure that they will not be judged for what they don't know, but rather for what they do. We can say confidently with Abraham, "Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (Gen 18:25).