

Understanding Your Teenager's Doubt

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Psalm 10 begins with the words, "Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you always hide yourself in times of trouble?" It begins with a complaint, with a doubt or question. There are many such doubts expressed in this psalm and in other passages of Scripture. As we read these words we should consider for our own lives if it is appropriate to express doubt oneself or to allow one's children and teenagers to express their doubts.

I have three sons who are all in their twenties now. They began expressing questions and doubts about all sorts of things before they were five years old. All children express questions and doubts and at times these doubts are about the Lord and about Biblical faith. This is an issue with which anyone who has ever been involved with young people needs to wrestle.

Doubt Seen as a Danger Signal

Many people see the expression of doubt as a danger signal. A young person or adult with questions and doubts is perceived to be in danger of losing his or her faith. Sometimes it is assumed that a person's spiritual life is in poor shape, that he or she is struggling with doubts because that person is not very committed to the Lord or just being rebellious. If doubt is perceived as a danger signal, then it is probable that one of the following unhelpful reactions will ensue:

One of the most common responses to doubt is to tell a person, "You simply need to pray more and double your devotional reading time." Francis Schaeffer used to call this "loading everything onto the donkey of devotion." We could all do with more prayer and reading, but this proposal does not necessarily approach the particular problem with which the doubter is dealing. Schaeffer continued with his illustration by saying, "when we load everything onto the donkey of devotion, the donkey will eventually lay down and die!"

Another unhelpful response is to become acutely anxious about the spiritual well being of the young person. This simply adds further unease and discomfort to the doubts and questions with which the young person is struggling. The child thinks, "Now I've made somebody unhappy with me, or somebody anxious about me." That makes the doubt more difficult to resolve.

In other situations young people are challenged to repentance, as if repentance were the solution to the problems of doubt. A Covenant Seminary student was met with this response during her college years. She took a literature class from a Marxist professor who raised questions that in turn brought up doubts in her

mind about Biblical Christianity. So she innocently went to her pastor for help. Her pastor's response was to tell her to get on her knees and repent. That did not help much, to say the least. It made her think, "I'm not going to talk to him about anything that I'm struggling with." He basically told her that her problem was her sin and that the issues on her mind did not need to be addressed.

The fourth unhelpful response is to assume that the child or young person simply is not busy enough. A young person is treated as if he or she would not have these doubts if life were more full of useful activities. So parents just load on more chores to keep the child out of trouble – and perhaps even some punishment which might drive the doubts away.

Perhaps the most extreme response I have ever seen to the expression of doubt is that the teenager is actually thrown out of the home. This happened to a young German woman, a teenager who came to stay with us at L'Abri*. She had expressed some doubts in a personal diary, which her mother read and then showed to her father who was a pastor. He declared her "rebellious" and "reprobate" and cast her out saying, "You are no longer our daughter, nor are you a child of God." She was one of the most difficult and troubled people I have ever tried to help. Her parents said it was clear that she did not love God or belong to Him so they made her leave their home.

If you do not think people really respond to doubt in such ways, I can assure you these are real examples. After working with L'Abri for 20 years and having had thousands of young people come to stay with us from Christian homes and churches, I have seen how often these things happen when a young person is doubting.

Causes of Doubt

When we encounter a child (or adult) who is struggling with doubt it is helpful to ask questions in order to understand the cause of the particular doubts. The following is an outline of some of the more common causes: Many of the doubts with which young people struggle arise from the pain of their own personal experience.

One fairly typical example is the divorce of parents, often or invariably including the absence of the father, at least for long periods of time. Marriage and family are intended by God to be a picture to a child of God's faithfulness. When a marriage breaks up a young person is being given false messages about the trustworthiness of God, their heavenly Father. It is almost impossible for a child to go through the breakup of their parents' marriage or the abandonment of one of their parents without doubting the love of God in a very deep way.

Another cause for doubt comes with severe sickness or even the death of someone who is loved by the child. Death is abnormal. It is a consequence of the Fall and children need to be taught that. But no matter what teaching they have received, they are going to experience death as an abnormality. Death will inevitably cause questions and doubts because it is the ultimate expression that reality is not the way God intended it to be.

The experience of personal abuse or abuse of someone the child knows can be a source of doubt. As a freshman in high school, one of my son's friends told him how she had been severely sexually abused. He was not really old enough to handle that. He was just fifteen and one evening he came in our bed and just wept and

wept. Finally he managed to share with us what he had been told. Such an experience, even in the life of a friend, causes doubts and questions in a young person – and it should. Why do such things happen? This is going to raise doubts and questions about the goodness of God.

Young people can also experience doubt associated with disappointment caused by a poor performance academically, in sports, or some other activity. Problems in this area can be increased by parents demanding standards of success that are too high, especially when a parent's love is given or withheld as a reward for success or a punishment for failure. Inevitably this causes all kinds of tension and doubts in the young person's mind.

Other doubts arise from observing and experiencing the general reality of the brokenness of life in a fallen world. We can be completely sure that many young people have experienced doubt as a consequence of last year's terrorist attack on this country. All over the country, not only young people but many adults too, are experiencing deep doubts and questions because of what happened on September 11, 2001, and the quite appropriate anxieties that have followed.

As children learn about the terrible plight of people around the world, both now and at different points in history, this may raise questions and doubts. For a child who is learning about such things for the first time in some depth (such as the Holocaust), it can be very harrowing and can cause very serious questioning.

Doubts may arise as a person learns about the involvement of the church in the evils of the past. It is very challenging, for example if you are an African-American, to learn about the involvement of churches in slavery. Historical events such as the Crusades, the Inquisition, or persecutions in the 1700s in France are also disturbing. Along these same lines today many young women experience doubts because of the low view of women and the mistreatment of women that has often been a reality in many churches.

Finally doubts and questions arise because of the intellectual climate of the culture in which we live. By "intellectual," I do not simply mean high scholarship. I am referring to the intellectual climate of both scholarly and popular culture. The intellectual climate is thoroughly naturalistic. Even though the overwhelming majority of Americans say they believe in God, almost our whole culture acts and speaks as if God were not active in this world. You do not turn on the news and hear about what God is doing. You hear about what nations, movie stars, and people on the street are doing. This is not only true for the media. Christian believers often speak as if God were not active in the affairs of this world. We sit in a naturalistic chair as we look at the world, rather than in the supernaturalist's chair seeing that God is constantly at work in our own personal lives and in the history of this world.

All religions are regarded by the general culture around us as basically different paths to the same end or as the varied colors making up a rainbow. People believe that Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam are all different ways to the same God. Or they believe that religion is basically a sociological phenomenon.

The most fundamental tenet of postmodern culture is to deny that there is any truth that can be known. This is the most skeptical generation that has ever lived on this earth. Skepticism is communicated in much popular music, as well as in schools and universities.

We live in a culture that is morally relativistic. Christians are regarded as arrogant for holding strong moral convictions. That is challenging for a young person growing up in this society. It is challenging for anybody to have your friends regard you as arrogant because you have particular views on topics such as abortion or sexuality. It is very challenging to try to hang on to firm moral conviction for a young person in this culture.

The Bible is simply regarded as a human book full of errors. This is widely taught in schools, film, television, music, and literature – and even in many churches. A young person (or adult) who tells friends that he or she believes that the Bible is inerrant and true in all that it affirms will be greeted with incredulity and mockery.

Appropriate Responses to Doubt

What are appropriate responses to doubt, whatever the cause? Instead of responding with alarm, we can help a young person when we express sympathy. Doubt is the right response to much of what happens in this broken world. I tell people, “I struggle with that too, and I am a seminary professor. I struggle with doubts.” If you are a parent, pastor or youth group leader, make it a habit to express your own doubts and struggles. Children and teenagers need to see that Christianity is open to dealing with doubts, questions and problems. Set an example of vulnerability. They need to see that you find life difficult sometimes, that you have questions, that you have doubts. This is comforting to them.

Show Scriptural expressions of doubt. Help the young person see that Scripture itself encourages the expression of questions and doubts. There are many Psalms that are filled with doubt and questioning. And the Psalms are given by God as the Church's prayer book. The book of Ecclesiastes starts with “Meaningless, meaningless, everything is meaningless.” Ecclesiastes is still my favorite book of the Bible because it deals seriously with the problem of absurdity and meaninglessness. For me, one of the turning points in becoming a Christian was going to a friend's apartment for a Bible study on the first two chapters of Ecclesiastes. Up until that moment in life, I thought the Bible was just a book of fairy stories and legends that had absolutely nothing to do with reality. I saw that it is actually dealing with the kind of problems with which I and other people wrestle. So help the young person see that Scripture itself encourages the expression of questions and doubts.

Ask questions that will help you uncover the cause of particular doubts the young person faces. Jesus constantly asked questions of those who came to Him, seeking to uncover what was really going on in their heart and mind. Francis Schaeffer used to say, “If I have only an hour with somebody, I will spend the first 55 minutes asking them questions so that in the last five minutes I will have something to say which really speaks to them. Instead of speaking past them, I want to speak to them.” So ask questions.

Take the doubts seriously and answer them at the deepest level you possibly can. Obviously if a five-year-old comes to you and says, “How can God be good when Grandma just died?” you would answer that in a different way than you would answer a 15-year-old asking the same question. But in either case, you must answer the questions seriously. We are forbidden by Scripture to say “Peace, peace,” when there is no peace (Jer. 8:11). So try to answer at the deepest level you possibly can. This may mean you need to say, “I do not know how to answer that question right now. But I will go and do some study on it.” No honest questioner minds a person saying that. When I went back to serve at the English L'Abri after graduating from Covenant Seminary in 1971,

I would sit at the dinner table with people expressing all kinds of doubts and my knees would be knocking as I thought, "What am I going to get asked next?" Many times I would have to say, "I'm going to have to think about that one. Maybe tomorrow we can talk about it." And I meant it. You need to be honest when you do not know what to say. You need to show enough respect for the doubter that you are willing to prepare a special study to help answer their questions.

When we take doubts seriously it encourages a young person to see that Christianity is indeed the truth, that it is not afraid of the hard questions, but rather can stand up to any challenge. This builds confidence in the Lord and in His Word, preparing the young person for the trials ahead that life invariably brings. Throughout life people will ask hard questions. Because the Christian faith is the truth, because this Word is the truth, you can take those questions seriously no matter how hard they are, and you can answer them out of compassion and love.

In the end, there are two things that must be behind everything we need to remember about facing doubt. We need a deep conviction that Christianity is true and we also need to love others enough to try to understand them and to take their doubts and questions seriously.

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