

Not Doubt But Unbelief

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Moments of great faith may also be moments of great doubt. One *locus classicus* for this coincidence of presumed opposites is John 20:24-25. It is the passage in which Thomas hears from the other disciples about the risen Lord. Thomas doubts, or at least that is what we have always been told, and lays down in no uncertain terms the conditions that must be met before he is willing to believe that Jesus is alive: "Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe." What could be more emphatic? The question though is not so much one of intensity as one of content. Do Thomas' words express doubt or unbelief?

THE ISSUE OF UNBELIEF

Doubt, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is "the state of uncertainty with regard to the truth or reality of anything." Doubt is what occupied Fyodor Dostoyevsky who in a letter to a friend wrote: "The chief problem dealt with throughout this particular work (*The Brothers Karamazov*) is the very one which has, my whole life long, tormented my conscious and subconscious being: The question of the existence of God." Unbelief, on the other hand, is more settled than doubt. It is more certain. It is the attitude or state of mind of one who does not believe.

This distinction is necessary for a right understanding of doubt and unbelief, and for a correct reading of John 20:24-25. When we read on beyond verse 25, it becomes evident that it is not doubt but unbelief that is at stake in the climatic moment of the Gospel of John for in verse 27 Jesus put the issue right on the line by saying to Thomas, "Do not be unbelieving, but believing."

The one thing we see in the Gospel of John, perhaps more clearly than any other place in Scripture, is a movement from unbelief to belief, and what is helpful to note is that this movement is not always immediate but often takes time. This is a very important feature of the Gospel of John, and we see it most clearly in Nicodemus who came to Jesus by night to make inquiry, who later made a defense of Jesus on the basis of Old Testament law, and who finally provided a mixture of myrrh and aloes for the embalming of Jesus' body.

Of course, we cannot be sure that Nicodemus ever came to believe in Jesus Christ or, so to say, was "reborn." That the final outcome of Nicodemus' belief is left unresolved is itself a form of good news because it allows the Gospel to close without closing the door completely on the unbeliever. This assures us that the purpose of the Gospel remains relevant and pastoral for those inside and outside the Church: namely, "that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name"

(20:31).

We see something of this same movement from unbelief to belief among the Twelve. John used the title "twelve" for the disciples surprisingly infrequently, and on the two occasions, when he did use it, what was at stake was unbelief. "Will you also go away?" climaxed the first crisis when "many of his disciples drew back and no longer went about with him" (6:66f); the second crisis arose when, in response to the witness of those who had seen the risen Lord, Thomas said, "Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe" (20:25). On the first occasion, Judas failed the test of true belief: "Did I not choose you the twelve, and one of you is a devil?" (6:70); and on the second, Thomas made the confession that climaxes the Gospel of John: "My Lord and my God" (20:28).

The point is that doubt really is not the issue in this final episode between Jesus and Thomas. What is overcome at the eleventh hour of the Gospel is not doubt but unbelief. The crucial question throughout the Gospel is not settled until the very end: will Thomas believe or not, and not only Thomas, but all of those who come after Thomas, even those who have not seen?

There is a certain amount of irony at this point because it was Thomas who had earlier overstated his belief, before he knew the meaning of his own words. Lazarus had died, and Jesus had announced his intention to go to him. At that time Thomas said the right thing but so out of sequence that it had no real meaning: "Let us also go, that we may die with him" (11:16).

All belief statements are not statements of belief. It was not doubt that kept Thomas from believing his own words. The form was present from the beginning but not the reality, the truth but not the consequences, the "Lord, Lord" (Matthew 7:21) but not the "My Lord and my God" (20:28). It is not doubt that the Fourth Evangelist seeks to dispel; it is unbelief.

PRECISE THINKING AND PRECISE SPEAKING

Too often in the church we make the mistake of not calling things by their right names, and we pay for this carelessness by vague, general, and too often confusing statements of our faith. We fall into slogans. We soak up cliches. We repeat without reflection. We take up dangerous words and make them perfectly harmless: "Let us also go, that we may die with him" (11:16).

We are perhaps too accepting, too undoubting. When someone speaks to us of the "patience of Job," how often does it occur to us that Job was not as patient as we make him sound and that such a statement actually misleads us. And the same is true when we say, "Doubting Thomas." What we do is impose certain presuppositions upon every passage of Scripture involving Thomas. There may be some basis, as well as some truth, in our words that characterize others, but a great deal of the time they are merely labels that mislead and block understanding. We invariably give the impression of knowing more than we know. We fall victim to a kind of pretending. We plant images that cannot later be erased. Gerald Ford, for instance, tripped and fell while deplaning from Air Force One. Even though he was one of our most athletic presidents, he immediately acquired a reputation for being clumsy. Lyndon Johnson is

perhaps best remembered, aside from the escalation of the Vietnam War, as the crude President from Texas who showed the world the scar on his abdomen following his gall bladder surgery. Now are these things really worth remembering? Do they tell us the essential things about these men, or do they divert our attention to insignificant matters?

Many of the problems we preachers make for ourselves are as much a fault of our language as of our thinking. Our theology can be right and our diction wrong, and nothing is gained; in fact, a great deal may be lost. A case in point is the Christological controversy that arose in National Capital Union Presbytery about three years ago when Mansfield Kaseman was asked the question, "Is Jesus God?" Kaseman, a United Church of Christ Minister, was being examined for admission into presbytery so that he could serve as co-pastor of the Rockville United Church, an ecumenical parish established by the Presbyterian Church and the United Church of Christ.

This controversy exists, to my way of thinking, because the Christology of those on both the side of the question and the side of the answer was inadequate and inadequately expressed. "Is Jesus God?" is not the way we traditionally ask questions about the person of Jesus Christ in Reformed theology. And if there are those who insist on asking the question in this way, the answer which Kaseman gave, "No. God is God," is still irresponsibly inadequate.

The church suffers for many reasons, but it suffers needlessly when we who preach either do not know what we are talking about or do not know how to express ourselves. How easy it is to forget that thinking and diction are inseparable, which is to say that our thinking can be no more effective than our word supply. Until we do a better job with our theology and with our language, front-page headlines will go on drawing adverse attention to the Presbyterian General Assemblies as in the *Houston Chronicle* on Sunday, May 24, 1981: "IS JESUS GOD? Minister's answer to question sets off controversy among Presbyterians." Inevitably, churches will go on withdrawing from the denomination for the lack of a clearly articulated theology from those who lead.

INCLUSION OF DOUBT WITHIN BELIEF

Having said, then, that it is not doubt but unbelief that surrounds Thomas' words, "Unless I see . . . and touch . . . I will not believe," does not preclude a legitimate concern with doubt. In fact, doubt should be one of the main points we make. This is necessary for two reasons: first, most of us come to John 20:24-25 with the presupposition that doubt is the issue at stake. Not to meet people where they are is a serious mistake in some of our preaching. Second, one of the intentions of the sermon should be to move doubt from the category of unbelief to the category of belief, in other words, to give doubt a right-of-way, to allow it to be what it is: namely, an element of belief that cannot be avoided.

The place to begin an understanding of doubt is to see it as a component of our finitude; to recognize "that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us" (2 Corinthians 4:7); to acknowledge our human limitations; to be able to confess that "our knowledge is imperfect . . .," that "for now we see in

a mirror dimly . . .,” and that “for now we know in part . . .” (1 Corinthians 13:9f). This is what we call “existential doubt.” It is the kind of doubt that grows out of our search for meaning. It exists because we exist. It can be denied, but it cannot be factored out of life. It is an element of uncertainty that cannot be removed but can only be accepted.¹

Doubt performs an essential function for belief: it protects belief from arrogance. There are times when we are “too sure” of what we believe, “too sure” for our good and for the good of others. I am thinking of the seventeenth-century writer who said, “I had rather see coming toward me a whole regiment with drawn swords, than one lone Calvinist convinced that he is doing the will of God.” The arrogance of belief almost always expresses itself in terms of self-righteousness. It lets us forget our own human fallibility.

The truth about us, that denial of doubt will not let us admit, is that we can never be absolutely certain that we are correct. “We” do, after all, “walk by faith, and not (like Thomas) by sight” (2 Corinthians 4:7). “Faith is (still) the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1). To be sure, belief and faith are not identical, but one is involved in the other. And to pretend that we have more certainty than faith allows is positively harmful to all concerned. What we want to say under such circumstances, if we can say it tactfully, is what Oliver Cromwell said to two contentious groups of Scotsmen: “I beseech you, by the mercies of Christ, at least consider the possibility that you may be wrong.” Our faith is actually a surrender to self, rather than to Jesus Christ, when we allow it to move beyond the shadow of a doubt.

The removal of doubt from our lives allows us to think more highly of ourselves than the facts justify. “We are men and women, and not God.” God is not so obvious as to remove all doubt. We cannot prove the existence of God, and so doubt remains. It cannot be shown irrefutably that Jesus rose from the dead, or that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, or that the child born at Bethlehem was “God with us.” If hope “sustains faith to the final goal, that it may not fail in midcourse, or even at the starting gate,”² it is doubt that restrains faith and prevents it from becoming arrogantly overconfident. There is an assurance that leads to conviction, but this assurance never completely frees itself from the nagging questions of doubt.

One thing we should remember is this: we do not necessarily help people when we try to remove the last vestige of doubt. Doubt may be more or less, but the goal of preaching should never be to eliminate it completely. Paul Tillich, in *Theology of Culture*, speaks directly to this point when he states that the object of communicating the gospel is to enable people genuinely to accept or reject it.

Even so, the temptation for those of us who preach is to go on giving answers that are not ours to give. Part of this is our own vocational anxiety, but part of it is also our knowledge that those churches which are growing are the very ones in which there is the least amount of doubt. A great many people want to be certain about what they believe, and a great many churches are willing to accommodate that quest for certainty. Living as we do in a pluralistic society, there are always more questions than there are answers. One way to

satisfy the quest for certainty which many people bring to church on Sunday morning is to avoid the questions; another is to give answers that further bring about the surrender of freedom and responsibility.³

And this surrender of freedom and responsibility is without a doubt the most common way to avoid doubt. In that famous chapter "The Grand Inquisitor" in Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, this point is vivid. The story is set in Spain, during the period of the Inquisition and is the account of a conversation between the Grand Inquisitor and Jesus Christ.

In the course of this conversation, the Grand Inquisitor accuses Christ of giving the people an unbearable burden: freedom. No gift, argues the Inquisitor, has been more insupportable for humanity than freedom. People prefer almost anything to freedom of thought, even death. And after struggling with the freedom which they did not want, the people finally found an escape: they turned their freedom over to the Church. And the Inquisitor concludes by saying matter-of-factly, "We have corrected Thy work and have founded it upon *miracle, mystery, and authority*. And men rejoiced that they were again led like sheep, and that the terrible gift (of freedom) that had brought them such suffering, was, at last, lifted from their hearts."⁴

I was reminded of this story recently when, on "Entertainment Tonight," Sally Fields was asked if she liked to live by rules. Her answer was a resounding "Yes," and she went on to say that her problem with women's liberation was that it had taken away from her many of the rules she lived by. The freedom of deciding for herself what was right was a burden. It was much easier when there were rules that helped her know when she was a "good girl."

There is a readiness in some people to believe what others say; a reluctance in others. Many factors are at play upon us: trust, fear, authority, acceptance, group pressure. In explaining "The Doubt of Thomas," Frederick W. Robertson told his congregation at Trinity Chapel in Brighton, "There are some men whose affections are stronger than their understanding; they feel more than they think. They are simple, trustful, able to repose implicitly on what is told them. . . . There is another class of men whose reflective powers are stronger than their susceptibility; they think out truth—they do not feel it out."⁵

In almost every church, there are both kinds of people—those who feel more deeply than they think and those who think more deeply than they feel. Both groups are apt to miss the role which doubt plays in the confirmation of faith. Those who preach should help their people struggle with doubt because the positive function which doubt performs is that it provides a built-in means by which faith is corrected. It keeps the tradition open and alive and does not allow faith to lose contact with contemporary life. The removal of doubt is really an illusion, and yet the illusion has its consequences: it closes the door on both the present and the future so that faith becomes fixed at some time and place in the past, allowing those in the present, freedom only to go on repeating what they have heard. "Doubt is overcome not by repression, but by courage. Courage does not deny that there is doubt, but it takes the doubt into itself as an expression of its own finitude and affirms the content of an ultimate concern. Courage does not need the safety of an unquestionable convic-

tion. It includes the risk without which no creative life is possible.”⁶

TOWARD A SERMON FOR EASTERTIDE

John 20:24-26 is part of a larger reading suggested for the second Sunday in Eastertide. A sermon preached from this text might begin with the words:

“Thomas is not the man we think he is. Forget that you have ever heard him called ‘Doubting Thomas.’ Doubt is not the issue surrounding the announcement of the resurrection. That is not where the Gospel of John has been leading us. The Gospel of John has been leading us, and all who read it, to ‘believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing we may have life in his name.’ This is the issue surrounding the announcement of the resurrection to Thomas by the other disciples. And Thomas’ response is not doubt but unbelief.”

I would then state the central idea of the sermon: “Today’s sermon, coming as it does the first Sunday after Easter, on what is ironically known as ‘low Sunday’ in the Christian tradition, is a plea for more doubt and less unbelief. This must sound to you like a contradiction in terms. Let me tell you what I mean.”

The first point I would make is that doubt performs a positive contribution to faith and should not be discouraged or eliminated. There should be an openness to doubt. The reflections in this article may help show that doubt does not negate faith, that faith is negated only by unbelief.

The second point I would make is that the appeal of the resurrection faith to Thomas and to all who come after him is “do not be unbelieving, but believing.” The victory of the resurrection is the victory over one thing and one thing only: unbelief. That victory yet has room for doubt.

I would conclude the sermon by saying something like this: “It is not necessarily doubt then that keeps people away from church in such large numbers (and this the first Sunday after Easter, but, of course, it could be any Sunday); it is unbelief. Doubt is faith’s built-in stimulus; unbelief is faith’s loss of meaning. Easter came and went for Thomas, like it does for many others, and all Thomas had to say about it was ‘Unless I see . . . and touch . . . I will not believe.’ It was not until ‘eight days later’ that the resurrection was re-enacted in such a way that these words gave way to words that climax the gospel: ‘My Lord and my God.’”

¹ Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1958), p. 16.

² John T. McNeill, ed., *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), p. 590.

³ Paul Tillich, *The Courage To Be* (London and Glasgow: Collins, 1952), pp. 56-57.

⁴ Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (New York: New American Library, 1957), pp. 227-244.

⁵ Gilbert E. Doan, Jr., ed., *The Preaching of F. W. Robertson* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964), pp. 181-182.

⁶ Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, op. cit., p. 101.