

I Doubt It

Allowing Space for Questions

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I (Brad) remember as a child in the '80s seeing vivid images of starving kids in Africa on television. Grotesque, overwhelming images.

I can actually recall sitting in my brother's bedroom watching Ethiopian famine vaulted to a little television screen in central Kentucky, and feeling completely helpless to do anything about it. I also remember wondering why God didn't just fix it. Why God didn't pour out rain over Africa or make some kind of manna appear to end the famine. Why God couldn't figure out how to make suffering stop.

Why God?

Those two words have punctuated the beginning of a faith crisis for more than a few believers through the ages—especially when marked with big questions about the world or about personal circumstances for which easy answers simply don't come.

Unfortunately, many of us have experienced periods of questioning that were met with silence, trite fix-it Bible quotations, or a well-meaning "Just have faith" from those around us. In short, our questions and doubts were pushed underground and either blocked out or left to grow like cancer until they overtook our faith.

Whether students in your ministry or kids in your home are disturbed by today's African famine or wondering about God's goodness in the midst of fifth-period algebra, their questions and doubts are begging to be known.

The question before us is: Will we *let them* be known?

Doubt in the Research

Some of us may come from traditions or training that suggest that doubt is troubling or even sinful. But our Sticky Faith research findings show that doubt can help form our faith in stronger and perhaps more lasting ways. [1 \(#fn-1-a\)](#)

1. Doubts happen

Seventy percent of the students in our study of youth group graduates reported that they had doubts in high school about what they believed about God and the Christian faith, and just as many felt like they wanted to talk with their youth leaders about their doubts. Yet *less than half* of those students actually talked with leaders. Likewise, less than half talked with their youth group peers about their doubts.

So if you do the math here (and at FYI we can't resist), that means that seven of every ten students is struggling with doubts—but only one or two of those ten is likely to have had conversations about those doubts with youth leaders or friends during high school.

When we asked our students in college to reflect back on the doubts they remembered having during high school, their responses tended to cluster around four central questions:

1. Does God exist?
2. Does God love me?
3. Am I living the life God wants?
4. Is Christianity true/the only way to God?

This research means a lot of kids are wrestling with their major questions and doubts alone and in silence.

2. Safety matters

Safety to express doubt seems to be connected with stronger faith. High school seniors who feel most free to express doubt and discuss their personal problems with adults show greater faith maturity in college. Further, among those who had doubts and did talk with leaders or peers about them, about half found these conversations helped them. This helpfulness was also linked to stronger faith.

3. Students' view of God makes a difference

When students feel safe to share doubts and struggles with peers and adults, they also feel more supported by God. Our study explored correlations between a scale measuring this concept of “God support”—the extent to which someone feels that God cares about their lives, feels close to God, and feels valued by God [2 \(#fn-2-a\)](#)—and a number of other factors. Safe environments for expressing doubts were positively correlated with God support in those analyses. Talking with adults about doubts is also linked to feeling supported by God. And feeling more supported by God is linked to stronger faith maturity as measured in other scales. So it seems as though there's a connection between students' perception of God, their perceived safety to express doubt, and their actual faith maturity.

4. Doubts aren't necessarily the end of faith

Lest we be misunderstood, simply having doubts doesn't transfer into more mature faith. For many students, struggling with faith can in fact lead to weakened faith, at least in the short term. One of the scales we incorporated in our third-year survey was the “Spiritual Struggles Scale.” [3 \(#fn-3-a\)](#) Students were asked to indicate the extent to which each item on a list of religious struggles (e.g., “Felt distant from God,” “Questioned my religious/spiritual beliefs,”) had described them in college. We found that the more frequent students' experiences of struggling with belief, the less likely they were to show Sticky Faith. This left us to wonder whether these students received the support they needed in the midst of their struggle.

On the other side of struggle, we asked students about various events and the extent to which they strengthened or weakened faith. [4 \(#fn-4-a\)](#) Interestingly, experiences of loneliness, anxiety, and feeling overwhelmed seem to push students toward God. These feelings were reported as strengthening faith, and when we analyzed them alongside measures of faith, we found strong correlations.

The same was true of dialogue with other students. In fact, the stretching experiences most connected to Sticky

Faith were interactions with other students; particularly with people of other faiths, and with students of other cultures/ethnicities. We often fear that the increased diversity of lifestyle and belief that many students encounter in college will weaken their faith; in our research, the opposite seems to be true.

Other research has found similar connections between college students' faith and experiences. In fact, some studies have shown that faith can grow as we encounter the following sorts of significant struggles as well as engage with new people: [5 \(#fn-5-a\)](#)

1. Exposure to diverse ways of thinking, whether through other students, classes, or some other source.
2. Multicultural exposure, through mission trips, living in another culture, befriending someone from another culture, or even reading about people from other cultures.
3. Relationship, health, or emotional challenges like significant illness, conflict with parents, or other negative experiences.

In her classic study on crisis and faith, Margaret Hall discovered that those who showed the most spiritual depth after experiencing crises were those who had consciously reoriented their faith in order to overcome the crisis. In other words, they were attentive to the ways their faith must change so they could climb out of the pit of despair. [6 \(#fn-6-a\)](#) One student in our study described a similar experience:

Entering my sophomore year of college, I became very, I guess, disappointed with life. I had all these ideas about college and it wasn't necessarily going how I wanted. I was feeling very far away from God and very dry spiritually, struggling to find a church and a church family where I could fit in at school. And as I went through that long struggle, basically spiritual darkness...when I came out of it I found God kind of waiting for me on the other side, and realized that he'd been with me through that struggle, through that time of question and doubt and searching.

Making Space for Doubt

Thankfully, we don't need to leave students doubting alone in our ministries or our homes. Below are some ideas for creating space in our relationships and programs with adolescents where their questions can be both heard and unpacked.

1. Creating Safe Zones

The perception that "good Christians don't doubt" can easily be fostered in youth ministry. This understanding can be intensified by the letdowns that may follow retreat and camp highs and hype, haunting students who wake up the next week and don't "feel God" as viscerally as before.

Our responsibility to the kids in our care includes creating safe places for questions that emerge along the faith journey. In the family, small group settings, mentoring relationships, and in the context of the broader youth ministry, how are doubts and struggles being voiced, and how are they being received?

One ministry we know is working to create space for struggles and doubts to be safely heard. They now close each session of their fifth-and-sixth-grade group with 56 seconds of silence where kids can write down any question on a note card. The hope is to make asking questions a normal part of faith development starting in early adolescence, even if those questions don't all get answered right away.

Another church from our first Sticky Faith Cohort is working hard to create space for doubt in the midst of its Confirmation program. At the conclusion of the six-month process, most students write a statement of faith. Last year one student felt safe enough to write a "Statement of Doubt" instead. This allowed her to share openly with the community that her own journey of faith wasn't yet at the place of trusting Christ. Several months later, she came to the point where she had wrestled through her doubts and decided to be baptized as an expression of her newfound trust. Alongside her were several adults who had supported her, prayed for her, and walked with her through her valley of doubt to the other side of faith.

2. Learning to Lament

While scripture doesn't always give us answers to all our questions, the Bible does have a surprising place where doubts and struggles are freely expressed: the book of Psalms. While we tend to think of the Psalms as a book of praises, the writers of the Hebrew songs and prayers that became their worship book were not afraid to ask God to show up in the midst of ugly situations. Out of the 150 psalms, over one-third are considered laments. [7 \(#fn-7-a\)](#)

A lament can be defined simply as a cry out to God. It's both an act of grief and of asking for help. In fact, lament is usually something we do in the dark places—often the darkest points of our life journeys. For example, Psalm 88 ends with the phrase, "darkness is my closest friend" (v. 18).

One of the most frequently-asked questions in scripture is "How long, oh Lord?" It's an important question because it calls God to do something to end our pain or the pain of others. Laments like this don't answer all of our questions, but lamenting can be a helpful part of strengthening our faith by reminding us that answers aren't everything. As the psalmists proclaim over and over, the unfailing love of God isn't wiped out by anything: not our crises, not our doubts, and not even our sins.

By weaving lament into our corporate worship and prayer life, we open up the possibility that kids might feel freer to share their own hard questions, and maybe even write or sing their own psalms of lament.

3. Preparing Seniors for Doubt and Dialogue

During our research, one youth pastor from Tennessee shared with us: "Every year in the fall I get phone calls—usually in the middle of the night—from students after they get a campus ministry visit where they're asked if they ever doubt. If they say yes, they're told they don't have enough faith. They call me back confused, asking, 'Is it okay to doubt or not?'"

Some students will leave our ministries or homes and face new questions and doubts in college that they haven't wondered about before. Giving them a healthy heads-up about this before they leave home can help doubt become a building block for new, deeper faith.

Alongside new doubts in college is often new dialogue. Students need to understand the basics of Christian faith in order to discuss their faith with others, and training in core beliefs (sometimes called apologetics) can be helpful. However, learning to *argue* about faith may not be the most helpful approach. Reflecting on her teenage years, author Alisa Harris writes about her own experience of being trained to give these kinds of responses: "I was taught that faith was so simple and easily grasped that I could argue someone into it, which ended up shaking my

faith when I found that belief wasn't simple, and argumentation and evidence could only take me so far.” [8 \(#fn-8-a\)](#) As we prepare seniors for talking about faith after high school, we will do well to avoid oversimplifying belief into neat tenets that resolve every question with a proof-text answer. [9 \(#fn-9-a\)](#)

Falling in the Light

One of the things we do in my (Brad's) church is regularly remind ourselves to live out our core values. In affirming authenticity as one of those values, we state that as we struggle and stumble through our faith journeys, "...we encourage one another to 'fall in the light'—to readily admit our mistakes, not to hide or try to cover them up."

Falling in the light. I like that image not only for thinking about mistakes, but also about our fall into questions and doubt. When students around us fall into seasons of uncertainty, let's help them fall in the light of Christ and Christ's people, ready to catch and hold them through doubt and back into faith.

Action Points

- How do you tend to respond when a student asks a hard question about God? What do you think your first response does to open up space for more questioning or shut that space down?
- Share this article with others in your ministry or with other parents. Then get together and share ideas for how you can collectively make it safe for kids to express their doubts and struggles.
- Gather a group of students and ask them for their perception of whether it's okay to share faith struggles in your ministry (or do this with your kids at home). Ask for their input on ways you can create a more supportive environment as well as actively seek answers to the questions that arise.

footnotes:

1. Portions of this article are adapted from Kara Powell, Brad M. Griffin, and Cheryl Crawford, *Sticky Faith: Youth Worker Edition* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011). Also see <http://stickyfaith.org/about-sticky-faith> (<http://stickyfaith.org/about-sticky-faith>) for more details about the research, spanning six years and including nearly 500 students from across the U.S. [↩ \(#ref-1-a\)](#)
2. W.E Fiala, J.P. Bjorck, & R. Gorsuch, "The Religious Support Scale: Construction, validation, and cross-validation," *American Journal of Community Psychology* (2002: 30, 761-786). [↩ \(#ref-2-a\)](#)
3. Adapted with permission from Astin, A. W., Astin, H. S., & Lindholm, J. A. *Cultivating the Spirit: How College Can Enhance Students' Inner Lives*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, in press. And Astin, A. W., Astin, H. S., & Lindholm, J. A. "Assessing students' spiritual and religious qualities." *Journal of College Student Development*, in press. [↩ \(#ref-3-a\)](#)
4. Adapted from the HERI 2007 College Students' Beliefs and Values Follow-Up Survey, UCLA. [↩ \(#ref-4-a\)](#)

5. For example, see Gay Holcomb and Arthur Nonneman, "Faithful Change: Exploring and assessing faith development in Christian liberal arts undergraduates," in Dalton et al (eds), *Assessing Character Outcomes in College* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004, New Directions for Institutional Research No. 122, 93-103). [↩ \(#ref-5-a\)](#)
6. Margaret Hall, "Crisis as Opportunity for Spiritual Growth," *Journal of Religion and Health* (Vol. 25, No. 1, Spring 1986, 8-17). [↩ \(#ref-6-a\)](#)
7. For a very helpful introduction to Psalms of lament, see Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A theological commentary*, (Augsburg Old Testament Studies; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984). [↩ \(#ref-7-a\)](#)
8. Alisa Harris, Raised Right: How A Young Culture Warrior Went from Belligerence to Burn-Out to Love, excerpted in *YouthWorker Journal*, <http://www.youthworker.com/youth-ministry-resources-ideas/youth-culture-news/11655043/> (<http://www.youthworker.com/youth-ministry-resources-ideas/youth-culture-news/11655043/>) [↩ \(#ref-8-a\)](#)
9. Interestingly, Christian education doesn't inoculate students from doubt either. In an opposite twist, one study of nearly 3,500 college students found that students at private Christian colleges were actually more likely to struggle spiritually than students at public universities or non-religious private schools. Alyssa N. Bryant and Helen S. Astin, "The Correlates of Spiritual Struggle During the College Years," *The Journal of Higher Education*, Vol. 79, No. 1 (January 2008). [↩ \(#ref-9-a\)](#)



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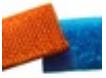
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