

KEY POINTS from *Benefit Of The Doubt: Breaking The Idol Of Certainty*

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- **Faith's essence.** Faith's bottom line is 'Jesus Christ, and him crucified' (1 Cor 2:2).
 - **The Bible.** Honest reading of it raises questions about, for example, the literal truth of some of its stories, or about human origins. Integrity requires us to face those questions, not turn away from them as if to question one aspect would mean rejecting the quality of the whole. This is the unhelpful 'house of cards' model of faith and the Scriptures (more on this below).
 - **Faith and doubt.** We must reject the common notion that 'a person's faith is as *strong* as that person is *certain*.' 'To be frank, the people who are best at convincing themselves that something is true, beyond what a rational assessment of evidence warrants, are most often people who are either self-delusional or intellectually dull' (p13).

The 'certainty' model of faith is also unbiblical. It is *psychological* in nature, whereas biblical faith is essentially *covenantal*, expressed not in *mental convictions* but in how a person *lives* (more on this below). 'While this model yet looks to the Bible as God's Word as the foundation for *what* we believe, it doesn't lean on it as the rational foundation for *why* we believe... By returning to the biblical model of faith, many if not most of the struggles that thoughtful believers have with their faith, as well as the struggles that cause so many to abandon their faith, can be altogether avoided' (p17).

Believing in evolution, viewing some of the Bible's stories as folklore or questioning the historicity of some Bible characters is OK. It does, however, cause some *cognitive dissonance*, which can be painful. But living with questions and uncertainty is a mark of maturity.

'I'm going to offer eight arguments as to why I believe certainty-seeking faith is misguided, unhealthy, and dangerous.'

1. *The Bible encourages our use of reason.* There is only one way to check something's veracity: by rationally examining the evidence. God says, 'Come now, let us reason together' (Isaiah 1:18). And 'Jesus frequently encouraged people to carefully search for truth and to rationally consider matters (e.g., Matt. 7: 7– 8; Mark 4: 24; Luke 8: 18; 12: 24, 27; 14: 28– 33)' (p36).
2. *Certainty-seeking faith makes God look sadistic*, rather than the God revealed ultimately in Jesus. The idea of a God cruel enough to heal a sick friend only if we can screw up enough 'I believe' does not seem to fit with the kind of thing Jesus would do. Such a God would be an 'Al Capone God'.
3. *It replaces biblical faith with magic.* Magic is behaving in certain ways to influence your gods to give you what you want. Its aim is to benefit the practitioner, whereas biblical faith is about cultivating a covenantal relationship with God. 'I stand by my claim that the notion that God grants healing or salvation or anything else on the basis of how certain people can make themselves about particular beliefs or on the basis of any other behavior is closer to magic than it is to biblical faith' (p40).
4. *It requires people to hold their faith in an inflexible way.* This is not viable in today's complex, pluralistic and ambiguous world. No longer is it reasonable to expect people to hold the complete 'package deal' of doctrines traditionally associated with evangelical faith. 'The fact that the all-or-nothing and certainty-seeking model of faith can't adjust to accommodate the complex ambiguity of our contemporary world is yet another reason for thinking it's mistaken' (p43).
5. *It tends to inflict a selective learning phobia on those who hold to it.* People feel insecure about questioning *any* aspect of their interconnected web of belief. Cognitive dissonance is painful! But 'learning requires students to be willing and able to allow their beliefs to be challenged and to experience cognitive dissonance' (p44).

6. *It tends towards hypocrisy.* We expect people of other religions to put aside their 'pride' and be willing to acknowledge that they are wrong. But we do not have the same expectation of ourselves!
 7. *'Any religion, including Christianity, that encourages people to strive for a feeling of certainty and to therefore suppress doubt is a potentially dangerous religion'* (p48). This explains current Muslim terrorism, but it is just as dangerous in a Christian context, as history demonstrates.
 8. *'Those who strive to feel certain that their beliefs are true are not, in fact, primarily concerned about the truth of their beliefs'* (p50). Instead, they are concerned with feeling certain their beliefs are true and avoiding the potential pain of questioning them. The quest to feel certain is thus self-serving.
- **Certainty as an idol.** All human beings experience *Sehnsucht*, a hungry heart, a yearning for God. It comprises (1) a need to experience God's *perfect, unconditional love*; (2) a longing to know that we have *unlimited or unsurpassable worth* to God; (3) to know that we are *absolutely secure* in this love and worth. In a word, it is a longing for *life* in its ultimate sense. This is the most fundamental driving force in our lives.

Only sharing in the *love that unites the persons of the Trinity* can satisfy this hunger (see John 17:20-26). And we come to share in it through Jesus Christ, specifically through his cross. Any other object of our seeking becomes an *idol* that sucks the life out of us.

For some, that idol is theology and the study of Scripture, if they don't allow those things to lead them to Christ (see John 5:39-40). 'The ultimate purpose of studying Scripture and of holding true beliefs is to lead us to, and to help us sustain, a relationship with God through Jesus, our one true source of life' (p67). Finding our 'life' in certainty about our beliefs makes that certainty into an idol. 'The God revealed on the cross is a God who loves people more than right doctrines' (p70). It's the relationship with him that gives us 'life', not the beliefs that got us into that relationship.

- **Faith and wrestling with God.** 'Biblical faith is grounded in a willingness to be honest with ourselves and with God about whatever questions, doubts, or complaints we may have' (p77). This is illustrated in Jacob's wrestling with God (Gen 32:22-32). God could have zapped him any time he wanted, but he didn't because the wrestling was his way of *deepening his relationship* with Jacob. And he commended Jacob by renaming him 'Israel'—one who has the audacity to struggle with God. He likes us to do the same.

Abraham dared to question God's justice (Gen 18:20-33). *Moses* argued with him over the destruction of the Israelites (Ex 32:10-14). *Habakkuk* put some straight questions to him. But *Job* is perhaps the prime example of 'Israelite' faith. He accused God of acting ruthlessly, even capriciously, whereas his 'friends' essentially defended the Machiavellian view of God that Satan had suggested was true. At the end God rebukes the 'friends' for their pious nonsense but commends Job for speaking 'what is right' about him (Job 42:7; and see 13:3). 'Right' means 'straight' here: Job was 'straight' in his dealings with God, expressing his frustrations frankly. 'We later learn in Christ that the true God not only does not zap ignorant humans who sincerely rail against God, as Job did; he loves them to the point of giving his life for them' (p89). True faith is grounded in *authenticity*.

The nature of faith does not change when we move to the NT. It is still the *trusting of another's character* in the face of uncertainty. *Jesus* himself illustrates this: in Gethsemane where, being human, he struggled with the demands of his destiny. He tried to influence the Father to change his plan, but trusted him anyway. The struggle continued on the cross, in his 'Why have you forsaken me?' His question was frank, his faith authentic. 'We can affirm that the Son of God experienced separation from the Father and that his cry of abandonment was authentic. But far from *disrupting* the unity of the Trinity, this horrendous separation, along with Jesus's cry, *perfectly reveals* this unity, for all three persons entered into this separation *out of perfect love*' (p96).

- **Covenants and contracts.** 'Beliefs' are mental convictions that something is true, whereas biblical 'faith' 'involves a commitment to trust and to be trustworthy in a relationship with another person' (p113). It is a willingness to *act* on one's mental convictions.

In the West we are used to relating to other people on a *contractual* basis, but biblical relating is *covenantal*. 'In a contractual arrangement people place their trust in the binding force of the contract *rather than in each other*' (p114). 'People enter into covenants because they trust one another; people enter into legally binding contracts precisely because *they don't*' (p115).

To read the Bible with a contractual mindset can only distort one's concept of faith. Also, 'there's been, almost from the start, a strand within the Western theological tradition that has tended to conceive of our relationship with God in legal terms, where contractual concepts are more at home than covenantal concepts' (p116). The Bible does use some legal metaphors, but these are 'conceived of within a broader and more dominant covenantal context' (p117). Sadly, the Reformers made the legal dimension the centrepiece of their doctrinal framework. So people ask exactly what beliefs they must hold in order to be saved, and what specific sins may put their salvation at risk—all the fruit of contractual thinking. They view the Bible as a litigation manual. By contrast, God want 'a profoundly interpersonal, covenantal relationship with us that is characterized by honesty, trust, and faithfulness' (p120).

God has a marriage covenant with his people. The church is Christ's bride, betrothed to him (in the pattern of Jewish marriages) and awaiting his arrival and the wedding day. Baptism is our betrothal ceremony. Communion is our betrothal feast. The Holy Spirit is our promissory betrothal gift. 'When we place our trust in Christ and pledge our life to him, we are saying, "I do!" to his marriage proposal, offered to us on the cross' (p125). Our life as Christians is one of a living relationship with him.

Faith is thus a visible thing; it is shown in the realities of our everyday living (James 2:26). And in the church it will be seen in a willingness to challenge each other to change and to become more Christlike—in contrast to the rampant individualism in Western society as a whole.

Struggles and debates within a marriage can strengthen the relationship rather than weaken it. And our questions and frustrations, expressed to the Lord within our covenant with him, have the same effect. 'The map is not the territory' (p148)—our concept of God, or our beliefs about him, are not themselves God. We get life from him, not from our beliefs about him. 'A true and living faith is never a destination; it's a journey. And to move forward on this journey we need the benefit of doubt' (p151).

- **Practising faith—and doubt.** 'I eventually found an alternative way of practicing faith— a way that allowed me to simultaneously be grounded in my relationship with Christ while being creatively adaptive with my theology' (p157). By contrast, most evangelicals embrace a 'house of cards' approach to their faith; if one doctrinal element is shifted (e.g. creation was not in six 24-hour days, or Adam was not a real person), the whole system collapses.

'Rather than believing in Jesus *because I believe the Bible to be the inspired Word of God*, as evangelicals typically do, I came to believe the Bible was the inspired Word of God *because I first believe in Jesus*' (p159).

That belief in Jesus is for various reasons: (1) *philosophical*: 'the biblical worldview that is centered on a Creator who has the loving character that Jesus reveals makes better sense of my total experience of the world than any competing story or theory.' (2) *existential*: the claims of Jesus 'ring true' deep in one's spirit. (3) primarily *historical*: the undisputable transformation of Jesus' disciples and the resultant worldwide growth of the church (p160ff). We are thus, first and foremost, followers of a *person*, Jesus, not followers of a book. The book is important but secondary, and we can thus debate issues about its contents without that rocking our faith in Jesus.

Jesus set his stamp of approval on Scripture, both OT and NT, and we honour it for that reason, and regard it as inspired by God. But we don't make Scripture our idol. We are thus freed to pursue our relationship with God without having to first resolve the 'encyclopedia of biblical difficulties'.

'Despite the common claim of conservative Christians to base everything on the Bible, the rigid, all-or-nothing way they typically hold onto their beliefs is actually not *biblical*' (p168). Note Jesus' attitude to the Pharisees in Matthew 23:23, and his emphasis on the spirit, not the letter, of the law in Matthew 22:37-40. The NT writers echo his approach (see e.g. Romans 13:10; Gal 5:14). Not everything in Scripture carries equal weight. Loving God and our neighbour is its essence (1 Cor 13:1-3; 1 Peter 4:8; Col 3:14).

It is helpful to place our doctrines in a series of three concentric circles round the centre, which is Christ himself. (1) The innermost circle contains the *dogma* of the church: those doctrines traditionally understood to constitute orthodox Christianity (e.g. the Trinity, Christ's divine and human natures). (2) The next circle contains *doctrines* embraced by orthodox Christians, but over which there have been some disagreement (e.g. exactly how God governs the world). (3) The outermost circle contains *opinions*: doctrines over which there has rarely been unanimous agreement (e.g. the 'gap theory' of Genesis 1).

This scenario is helpful in evangelism because it enables people to move to a relationship with Jesus and get their 'life' from him without first ticking a long list of doctrinal boxes and reaching a view on a host of different issues.

- **Jesus as the ultimate revelation of God.** 'Since Jesus is the ultimate revelation of God's true character (Heb. 1:3), we need to always ask whether the picture of God presupposed by a particular belief or practice is consistent with what we learn about God in Christ' (p37).

While we believe that the whole of the Bible is inspired by God, clearly not every portrait of God in Scripture is of equal value—e.g. the God who orders the genocide of the Canaanites, compared with the revelation through Jesus of the God who loves his enemies enough to die for them. We must embrace a Christ-centred view of Scripture. He is the unexpected twist in the tail of the Bible's story. The Jews looked for a military Messiah who would destroy their enemies, the Romans. Instead, Jesus refused that approach and permitted himself to be executed by the Romans, revealing God's deep love for enemies.

The NT authors affirm that 'the revelation of God in Christ completes, and in this sense trumps, everything that preceded him' (p177). Jesus rates John the Baptist's words and ministry above that of the OT (Mat 11:11), and rates his own testimony as 'weightier than John's' (John 5:36). Only Jesus is 'the *exact representation* of [God's] being' (Heb 1:1-3). Jesus 'is himself God' (John 1:1), and he says, 'No one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him' (Matthew 11:27). On the Mount of Transfiguration (Luke 9) God pushes Moses (the Law) and Elijah (the prophets) into the background and insists we should listen only to Jesus, who on several occasions quoted the OT Law and then added, 'But I say to you...', amending the Law. *All* of Scripture is ultimately about him (Luke 24:25-27).

- **Rebuttal of the 'certainty-seeking' view of faith.** The two passages most quoted by proponents of the 'certainty' view are James 1:6-8 and Mark 11:24.

James 1:6-8. The context (down to v18) shows that this is not applicable to all requests but is specifically about asking God for *wisdom*. The word 'doubt' is the Greek *diakrino*, meaning 'waver', as when evaluating competing ideas. Here it is wavering between loyalties, between seeking wisdom from God alone, or compromising by seeking some of it from the world. Again, this is covenantal and personal: is our faith in God alone? And the context suggests that this refers to how we cope with trials and persecution. So it is not a self-seeking, 'get what you can believe for', kind of faith but one that leans entirely on God whatever the circumstances.

Mark 11:24. Jesus cannot have meant this to be taken literally, because the very act of asking presupposes that we *don't* believe we have already received it! Even Jesus himself didn't practise it literally: if so, he would never have asked the blind man in Mark 8, after he had anointed his eyes with saliva, 'Do you see anything?' but would have encouraged him to believe he had already received his sight in full. This verse illustrates typical Jewish hyperbole—the expression of truth in unqualified and extremely exaggerated ways. Many of the Bible's alleged 'promises' fall in this category, e.g. Proverbs 22:6, and by taking them literally we change them into magic formulae.

So what was Jesus teaching in Mark 11:24? He is using hyperbole to teach the importance of trusting God (covenantal faith again) when we pray, by using our *imagination* in the right way. 'We think, anticipate, and remember, not by reciting information in our minds, but by replicating our actual experiences of the world in our imagination' (p206). Contemplating in a vivid way the event we anticipate makes us long for it, which motivates us to act in ways that will help bring it about. This is what Mark 11:24 is encouraging.

Hebrews 11:1 is a key verse on how to put faith into practice, and it fits in with the above. Faith is the 'substantiating (Greek *hypostasis*) of things hoped for' and the 'conviction (Greek *elenchos*) of things not seen' (Darby). *Hypostasis* is not a *feeling* of certainty (some versions unhelpfully have 'confidence', 'being sure' or 'assurance') but the *substance* that gives confidence. *Elenchos* is a conviction that is based on evidence—conviction, but stopping short of certainty. Thus, in line with Mark 11:24, 'faith involves embracing a vivid vision of an anticipated future that in turn gives rise to a compelling conviction that moves us toward that future' (p212).

That this is what the writer to the Hebrews meant is confirmed by the example of faith that follow. Those saints 'did not receive the things promised; they only *saw them* and *welcomed them* from a distance' (v13, cf v39). They were 'looking for' and 'longing for' a better country (v14, 16), and 'looking forward' to it (v10). And God

commended them for their faith (v39) even though they didn't arrive at it before they died. That is real biblical faith.

- **Trusting God for what?** Some give credit to God's faithfulness in questionable ways. One man, taking a literal 'healing' view of 2 Pet 2:24, praised him for healing his wife from pneumonia, then also praised him for later letting her die swiftly after she contracted cancer. But 'if nothing is allowed to count as evidence *against* our belief in God's faithfulness, one has to wonder if we're really asserting anything meaningful when we point to events as evidence *of* God's faithfulness' (p220).

Faith must be more than pious optimism. For this to be true, however, we have to be clearer on what we should and shouldn't be trusting God for. Should we, for instance, trust him to bring the right husband/wife into our life, or to protect our children from harm? No, because a hard look at reality shows it doesn't work. The answer to Eliphaz's rhetorical question in Job 4:7 ('Who, being innocent, has ever perished? Where were the upright ever destroyed?') is 'Lots of people' and 'Frequently'! If God ran the world entirely in our interests, Satan's charge at the beginning of the book would be valid. 'There are a multitude of variables other than God's will or our faith that influence what happens to children, marriages, careers, finances, health, and every other aspect of our lives' (p224).

We should be cautious about latching onto alleged 'promises of God' in Scripture, because if we pray on the basis of them and things go wrong we have to—if we are honest—either blame God for breaking his promises or blame ourselves for not having enough faith. Biblical principles, often expressed hyperbolically, must not be made into magic formulae. Most of these promises are in the OT, part of God's dealing with ancient Israel, in which he employed a system of instant material rewards and punishments because of their immaturity. With the coming of Jesus that system was turned on its head. Now, for example, it is the poor who are blessed and the rich who are warned, the hungry who are blessed and the well-fed who are warned, those persecuted by their enemies who are blessed—and, far from being victorious over them, they are to love them and do good to them! The cross proclaims an other-oriented love, not a self-seeking kind, and this is to be the way God's people now live. We are to turn our backs on using the Bible as a legal textbook to get what we want.

That is the contractual approach, whereas we are in fact in a covenant. God 'thus wants our trust to be placed solely *in his character*, not in a *legally binding document*—not even in his inspired Word, treated like a legal document' (p229). So we are, first, to trust the goodness of God's own character and then, second, to trust him for that character to be increasingly reproduced in us. The cross teaches that we are...

- (1) To embrace *a trustworthy picture of God's character* as revealed by Jesus, and particularly in his death on the cross. We will see him as a self-sacrificially loving God who gives priority to reaching out to people and who will not allow anything to separate them from his love. We must hold to this view of his character even when things go tragically wrong in our lives, attributing those things to wills other than his. At the same time, we must trust his ability to bring good even out of those evil things (Rom 8:28).
- (2) To *look to him alone for 'life'*. In view of the extreme lengths to which he went in order to make us his own, can we possibly look elsewhere (to what we build, own or achieve) for it? We matter to him more than we can imagine; we have unsurpassable worth in his sight. And his love for us is unconditional!
- (3) To *model our lives on that of Jesus*. 'The resurrection confirms not only *that* the Son of God was victorious over sin, death, and the powers of hell, it also confirms that *the way* the Son defeated evil is *God's way of defeating evil*' (p244). If we are 'raised with Christ', then we are to live the non-retaliatory way of the cross, even if it means being persecuted and killed, as he was. Our sufferings will be those caused by living in a way that cuts across the patterns of worldly society. That is the way of life that will triumph in the end: 'We can be confident that God is using our decisions to love rather than hate, to serve rather than retaliate, and to be killed rather than to kill to move the world closer to the time when God will fully reign on the earth' (p246).

The above notes are very sketchy, and I encourage you to read the book for yourself!

David Matthew, April 2014