

## Dealing With Doubts – Part 5

### Volitional Doubt

by Dr. Gary Habermas

(Used by permission)

Our third category of uncertainty is chiefly related to one's will and one's ability to make certain choices. Regular issues of importance for this species of doubt might include the dilemma of weak faith or the questioning of whether one actually made a decision to trust Jesus Christ in the first place perhaps because of the young age at which the choice was made. Other volitional examples concern an unwillingness either to repent of a sin(s) or to apply known truths to one's life.

Characteristics of volitional doubt may possibly involve an attitude of appreciation for the facts, while not really being willing to make the appropriate decision which seems to be indicated by them (without any objection to the data itself or its applicability). Or sometimes such identification is made by the realization that no number of facts ever brings the individual to the appropriate decision.<sup>1</sup> Or again, the person may continue to raise small, inconsequential "problems" which are obviously not the chief issues.

Another possible characteristic is a person's refusal to allow the continuation of the peace which he sometimes experiences, perhaps because the individual either misunderstands the nature of such peace or because he might believe that he is not ready to experience it until the last few issues are settled. I remember a discussion with a psychologist friend of mine years ago where the topic was a mutual acquaintance who had been struggling through a quandary over just this issue. At one point in our dialogue the psychologist asked me if I thought peace was itself a feeling which one had (emotional) or something which was brought about by a decision which one made (volitional). I answered that it was a feeling, after which I was startled by my friend's strong pronouncement that I was mistaken: peace was obtained by a decision.

Peace is not something which one necessarily "feels" but is a state of mind which occurs only by decision. Therefore, peace can be present even when a person is undergoing various sorts of turmoil. And in this sense the failure to have peace, especially when the way appears to be clear, is very possibly due to a volitional quandary since its absence is also a choice which is not being made. And at this point it perhaps becomes apparent in one respect that all doubt may have a voli-

tional element because the individual both chooses to question and can decide not to do so, as well. Similarly, the desire to cover up sin or the refusal to confess and repent of it also tends generally to be a matter of the will.

In the last chapter it was mentioned that volitional and emotional doubt shared at least two characteristics which were just mentioned—the presence of small, “picky” problems and the refusal of peace. This raises the further issue of distinguishing between these two species of uncertainty at these points. I have already suggested that the key lies in both the origin of each individual doubt and the means by which it manifests itself. For instance doubt which is primarily volitional is likely to be expressed more calmly, without complications due to distraught emotional states. It may also tend to center much more on decision-making concerns, perhaps on why the person appears unable to actually effect a change in his life. And it is this crucial issue to which we now turn.

### **A. By Whose Will and Power?**

Before we can actually discuss the activation of the will, we need to answer a tough question. It may be recalled that we ended the last chapter by posing a quandary raised by Backus, who testified that a “frightening” aspect of dealing with the issue of self-control was that Christians might conclude that they can change their behavior by a self-generated effort, thereby undermining the power of God.<sup>2</sup>

The problem here is a least threefold. Initially, only God can save persons. Absolutely nothing which we do can ever assist Him even one iota in our salvation and justification. Such is simply an act of God. And I hope the reader understands that this book has been written to Christians who have therefore already received God's gift of salvation. Thus I by no means wish to imply that we can ever effect our initial relationship with God or have any part in earning God's merit.

But additionally, even from Christians one can certainly get the frequent impression that it is possible to improve our initial standing with God by our good works after salvation. But the biblical testimony is that, while one's heavenly position (or rewards) is determined by post-conversion commitment, once we begin the Christian life by faith we ought never return to any view which holds that our works can complete the initial salvation itself. Such is even an abomination to God (Gal. 3:1-14; 5:1-6).

Further, while Scripture often encourages Christians to change their behavior and to progress towards maturity, it is clear that God is at work in their lives so that it is His power working through believers instead of their own. We cannot at this point introduce the entire issue of God's sovereignty and man's free will (as if we could completely solve it!), but it is sufficient here simply to say that Scripture both commands us to mature and states that the real power comes from the Lord.

So while many New Testament passages implore the believer to change his behavior (or to otherwise commit himself),<sup>3</sup> several texts mention that both God's activity and ours is involved.<sup>4</sup> A classic text is found in Philippians 2:12-13 where we are first told that believers are to “work out” their salvation (v. 12) only to find that it is

God who is working in us (v. 13). In other places Paul states more specifically that it is not our power but that of God's power in us (2 Cor. 4:7; 10:3-6; Gal. 2:20). Yet it is our choice to so act in accordance with God's will and power (Gal. 5:16-26; Eph. 6:10-18; Phil. 4:13). Other New Testament writers agree that believers must will to do God's will (Js. 4:4-10; 1 Pet. 1:18-2:5; 1 Jn. 3:23-24).

Thus, while Christians are commanded to make decisions by their own will, the more important will and true power is that of God. This in no way allows the believer to claim that his choice is not crucial, for we are specifically told that we are to choose to do God's will so that He can work through us; God does not force our wills.

So how does Backus face his own dilemma? First he poses the problem again, asking how a counselor can assist persons in need without implying some sort of self-effort? He answers:

Despite this hazard, the Scriptures contain much instruction in how to change behavior, thoughts and feelings. But it is never suggested in the apostolic writings that the power to change comes from the self. Instead, the Word exhorts and instructs the new man, empowered by the Holy Spirit, in how to walk so as to please God.<sup>5</sup>

There is at least one other sense in which it is actually God who works through believers. The universe which God has created has certain laws built into it; when one acts in accordance with them, a more harmonious life can be one result. For this reason, obeying His psychological laws can yield healing in one's thought life. In fact, even nonbelievers can to some extent take advantage of this benefit. Again Backus comments:

None of the habit-changing techniques suggested in this book can work without God's blessing. That is true even for unbelievers making use of them. As His sun must shine even on the evil if their crops are to grow, so the sun of God's blessing can and does shine even on godless people using methods in line with God's principles, incorporated in His Word and in the design of His universe. Without God's sustaining blessing, no human effort would avail anything—ever.<sup>6</sup>

Thus God works in persons, both more generally through His universal laws which affect both believers and unbelievers alike, as well as more specifically through Christians whose wills are in accordance with His will. But in both cases it is God's will which is more central and His power which is the true force in the universe. This provides a groundwork for our discussion of the Christian's will.

## **B. Activating the Christian's Will**

We have observed that numerous scriptural passages encourage, implore and command Christians to utilize their own wills to obey the Lord. And believers are also responsible for their choices.

With regard to the specific issue of volitional doubt and the failure to act at crucial points in order to change one's behavior, perhaps the most critical single concern is the growth of the believer's faith. When one's faith becomes increasingly inactive there is frequently a tendency to drift away from crucial elements of Christianity. And

as noted earlier, C.S. Lewis warns that most apostates are not argued away from Christianity: "Do not most people simply drift away?"<sup>7</sup>

So a lack of growth or commitment in a believer's life can signal a volitional problem. And as with most matters of the will, it often "spills over" into other areas. This is where one develops (and often invents) problems with Christianity, which may perhaps amount to excuses for the doubt which has already existed for some time.

Noting the utter seriousness of this species of doubt, attacking as it does the very resolution of the believer, one obvious question pertains to how a Christian's will can be activated (or re-activated). And since the most crucial subject in volitional doubt is probably the issue of how one's faith can grow, this will be an especially important topic for those whose commitment to Jesus Christ is either weak, immature or even waning.

So our concern is to help activate the believer's will and, as a specific expression of one's volition, to experience the growth of one's faith, as well. The former issue, in the general sense of changing one's behavior or breaking bad habits, is only of major concern to us as it impinges specifically on the presence of doubt. Otherwise it is much less the subject of this book than is the latter concern of faith. We have just indicated that the topic of how faith might grow is probably the single most crucial element in volitional doubt. This is primarily because most of the types of such uncertainty are concerned with (or are dealt with significantly by) the strength of one's faith.

In some cases, the solution would appear to be less problematical. In the case of those who trusted Christ as a child, the issue might concern the gaining of more knowledge about the nature of commitment or even of making a re-commitment. But for many others, motivation is a major factor; they need to desire to do God's will. To this end, I will suggest four steps to assist the believer in dealing with such a dilemma.

First, any strategy to assist the Christian's will in conforming to God's will should begin with a commitment to Him.<sup>8</sup> After all, if this is one's goal anyway, one should prayerfully communicate his intentions to submit to God at the outset. The act itself is helpful not only in affirming one's desire to the Lord, but in focusing one's attention on the goal and its seriousness. And if the type of volitional doubt suffered is one that has involved rebellion against the Lord, this would also be the time to confess and repent of that sin. Earlier we mentioned that unconfessed sin can, by itself, lead to doubt (cf. Ps. 66:18).

Second, a principle described in the last chapter will be repeated briefly here. Doubts of the will also most frequently involve telling oneself misbeliefs. Backus lists several instances of lies which affect one's volitional capabilities.<sup>9</sup> For example, one might say or think that, "I can't control this habit" or, "Past events are making me do what I am." Some criticize their own person: "I'm so worthless that I deserve my problem." Other common responses include the misbelief that, "Others can be committed believers, but I just can't do it" or, "It takes too much work to change a

habit or to more fully obey the Lord.” Also very harmful to the overall goal of conquering volitional doubt is the lie that, “I can’t increase my faith.”

In the last chapter we have already discussed in some detail the treatment of these misbeliefs.<sup>10</sup> To summarize, the chief strategy consists of locating these lies, removing them by arguing against them and replacing them with the truth. Numerous other suggestions for healing were also enumerated.

The chief purpose in this step is to remove the misbeliefs which we tell ourselves in order to both clear the major obstacles which often keep the believer’s will from being exercised and to utilize the administering of truth to actually start the healing process. In other words, Misbelief Therapy<sup>11</sup> can both weed out harmful thinking which affects an individual’s ability to act, as well as allowing truth to motivate the person to the godly action which he wills.

Third, faith needs to be challenged; it needs to be given an ongoing vision which will inspire it to action. Human beings act most purposefully when they have strong personal reasons for doing so. And so faith is best motivated not by rules and prodding (although such is valid and is sometimes needed), but when God’s reasons for seeking Him first become our reasons and desires. That is, when we are inspired enough by God’s perspective of reality that we internalize His reasons as our own, then faith will be ready for action.

For some Christians, such inspiration might be said to occur when they get a glimpse of God’s Person and His holiness,<sup>12</sup> or when they actually realize that Jesus is a living Person, making a personal relationship with Him possible.<sup>13</sup> According to Peter Kreeft, the deepest desire of all believers is for eternal life in heaven with God.<sup>14</sup> I mentioned in the last chapter that such an eternal home is the central hope for believers and that the New Testament repeatedly teaches that this is the perspective from which Christians ought to view this life.<sup>15</sup>

Actually, each of the subjects in the last paragraph is a different angle on a very similar truth. Believers naturally have a deep desire to know God and to be with Him forever. In fact, our Creator has made us that way (cf. Eccl. 3:11). Further, I think that this idea is the most motivating one for the Christian’s faith. Could anything be more appealing than eternal life with the God of the universe, Who guarantees that such life will always be new, creative and inspiring, never static or boring? For the believer who does not sense a “tug” of desire for such, I would recommend that he cultivate the New Testament teachings on this subject, meditating on them deeply. Faith could have no greater impetus as a grounds for personal action; no stronger reasons to internalize God’s perspective as our own could be given.

Fourth, faith must be activated. Once a commitment has been made, misbeliefs replaced and faith challenged with a biblical vision, the next step is performance. Our eternal destiny needs to inspire action and when it does so biblically it will have passed beyond the negative battle of fighting against doubt and into the positive realm of development in its own regard. Guinness states it this way:

What is more, faith, like health, is best maintained by growth, nourishment and exercise and not by fighting sickness.... Equally, faith grows and flourishes

when it is well nourished and exercised, so the best way to resist doubt is to build up faith rather than simply to fight against doubt.<sup>16</sup>

The faith which is growing, then, is more healthy than that which is simply fighting against invasion. So we not only wish to provide strategies for handling doubt of various kinds, but, further, to both activate the will and to see faith grow. But of course, one question which this raises is how faith does progress. Years ago, I would have said that answering this question successfully was the key to solving my own doubts.

While this topic could easily be the subject of an entire treatise itself, a few brief comments will be made here. After his research on this topic, Elmer Towns has noted numerous ways in which faith grows. Among these are obedience to the Word of God, yielding to the Holy Spirit during trials, by constant communion with God (through the various disciplines of prayer, fellowship and Christian service), by expecting God to act or bless and by giving thanks to God.<sup>17</sup> Conversely, Towns explains that faith is hindered by such things as believing a lie, trusting one's reason instead of God's Word, "leaping" without a basis, always requiring a sign from God and taking a "small" view of life instead of seeing the large picture.<sup>18</sup>

Each of these topics and others could be expounded at great length, but such, perhaps regrettably, takes us away from our present topic. I think that possibly the most important thing which I could relate here is that, wherever our faith is, we need to take it from that point and move it forward by small steps. The actual "how" of this suggestion will be saved for the next section of this chapter, but it will just be briefly mentioned that developing faith during times of doubt may be one of the most effective methods of causing faith to grow. In other words, since many of the readers of this book are presumably dealing with their own doubt, why not use such as an opportunity to let one's faith grow? It just may be that doubt could be conquered and faith grow, simultaneously.

But perhaps someone might react by asking what about the believer who decides not to act and who rejects such strategies? Initially, it should be pointed out that everything which is said in this entire book could be rejected, for no one is forcing anyone to act. One could always refuse to take appropriate measures in solving any of the species of doubt, or on any other issue.

Additionally, other suggestions certainly could be made concerning the activation of one's will. For example, Backus encourages writing out a plan, including the enumeration of specific strategies, making clear and specific goals, and telling someone else about one's efforts in order to provide further motivation to change.<sup>19</sup> Such an approach would also appear to work well with the more general topic of the weaknesses of the will, including specific problems such as changing one's behavior, repentance, or breaking bad habits.<sup>20</sup> And again, as with other species of uncertainty, the doubter should adopt a biblical methodology which best assists his special needs.

But in this chapter we have suggested a fourfold strategy: that the doubter make an initial commitment to God (including repentance, if necessary), identify and

replace his misbeliefs, challenge his faith with the vision to personally internalize God's eternal perspective, followed by action. One specific result should be an increase in one's faith. And in dealing with volitional doubt by this strategy, we have attempted to address both the more general issue of activating the believer's will with respect to making decisions (as with the use of Misbelief Therapy) and the more specific task of challenging faith and helping it to grow. We will now continue our discussion by making suggestions as to how faith in Jesus Christ, in particular, might be encouraged to increase.

### **C. Exercising More Faith in Jesus Christ**

It is our purpose in this section to more specifically view the issue of developing faith in the Person of Jesus Christ. We will look at this topic from two primary vantage points, each presented as questions. Should Christians continue to believe even when tough objections are raised against Christianity? And how do we actually practice belief, allowing it to grow?

In an essay entitled "On Obstinacy in Belief," C.S. Lewis entertains the first of these queries by admitting that believers do in fact think that it is laudatory to adhere to their faith in Christianity "against any evidence whatever."<sup>21</sup> But how can such obstinacy be defended? Why should Christians continue to believe in the face of possible objections to their faith? Shouldn't they, like good scientists, only proportion their belief to the facts?

Here Lewis proposes two answers. He defends such a continuing commitment holding, first, that Christianity is supported by the facts. So why should believers despair when the evidence (both of the past and present) continues to support the Christian message? Second, God is personal and, as such, should not be treated as the object of a laboratory experiment, but as a Friend with whom we are intimately involved. But to truly treat anyone as a friend is sometimes to trust that person "beyond the evidence, even against much evidence."<sup>22</sup> And conversely, no one deserves to be called a friend who deserts us when we are accused of something or who is not extremely cautious about accepting purported evidence against us. In fact, even the scientist must behave the same way if he is to have close friendships with others. This is shown by the way in which he will hold certain beliefs about those who are closest to him "with more certitude than the evidence, if weighed in the laboratory manner, would justify."<sup>23</sup>

Sometimes we must trust persons in the face of contrary evidence. The child with the splinter in his finger confronted by a needle or an individual learning to swim when he is forced to enter deep water for the first time may claim some reason for disbelieving that their best interests are being taken into consideration. But those who know better (and the child and the swimmer afterwards) usually understand the logic. Should an omnipotent God not have many ways which we do not understand? Besides, God has even warned us explicitly that there will be times when "apparent evidence" will be presented (including miracles) in an attempt to lead Christians astray (Mk. 13:22-23; 2 Thes. 2:9-12; Rev. 13:13-14). It is as if God is saying, "I told you so" (see especially Mk. 13:23). So why should we disbelieve, especially when

we have good data on which to accept His testimony concerning this and other issues?<sup>24</sup>

So Lewis concludes:

Our opponents, then, have a perfect right to dispute with us about the grounds of our original assent. But they must not accuse us of sheer insanity if, after the assent has been given, our adherence to it is no longer proportioned to every fluctuation of the apparent evidence.<sup>25</sup>

And here, I think, Lewis is certainly correct. Once a sufficient basis has been ascertained, it is a virtue to continuing trusting in personal situations. It is not only true of friendships, but even in scientific theory. Scientists do not discard a model every time one (or even several) bits of data oppose their central thesis or framework.

## **1. Why Christians Should Continue to Trust Jesus Christ**

This previous discussion, along with some additional considerations, provide ample reasons as to why we should continue to trust even when some apparent data which we are not able to explain opposes our position. We will give brief attention to several of these reasons.

First, an individual's salvation consists of trusting faith in the Jesus Christ of the gospel facts. And it must not be forgotten that our initial trust was well grounded in the factual data of the gospel, whether we realized it or not. This evidence is so strong that trust in other matters is warranted. In other words, the evidence for the facts of the gospel (and hence the central core of Christian theism) is sufficiently strong that it provides an extremely firm foundation for our continued faith even when other factors have not been totally explained. It even compels us to keep trusting until the new questions are worked out.

As we have already stated, science works in a similar manner. It does not overturn a model because some data are outstanding against it. If the original model is confirmed by a broad set of evidences, claimed exceptions are often either given tentative explanations, or judgment on the anomalies is simply suspended until more is known.<sup>26</sup>

Similarly, the Christian is warranted in continued belief in Jesus Christ even if there are issues he is not able to explain. The chief reason for this is that the gospel facts, in particular, are established on especially strong grounds. Anomalies do not overturn the core data of Christian theism. It might even be said that since the gospel data is so strong, other questions are often of somewhat less consequence anyway.

But second, beyond the facts themselves and the basic model to which they contribute, we have also said that Jesus is a person and that our relationship to him is a personal one. The more we realize this and believe it, the more it will be obvious to us that our commitment extends even beyond the evidence. Just as an individual ought not to desert his best friend when the latter is in trouble, or as a lover ought not to abandon his loved one on the basis of a complaint or because there

are some perceived problems in the relationship, so Jesus ought not to be disbelieved if contrary material surfaces. Relationships extend beyond the raw data on which they are based, and trusting Jesus extends beyond the strongly evidenced gospel facts.

Once when I was in the middle of quandary, worried that I was beginning to give up on my relationship with Jesus, my mother confronted me with a truth that I have never forgotten since that time. She asked me pointedly if I was willing to give up Jesus right then. When I responded by reporting my fear that I might stop believing, she repeated her question as to whether I would trade Jesus for someone else right now. As I responded in the negative (in fact, I was repulsed by the very thought), she asked me why that was so. And as I verbalized my answer, I realized something crucial: I didn't want to give up Jesus precisely because I had developed a personal relationship with Him and didn't want to follow any other person or teaching.

But I learned some other truths that day, as well. I realized that I should not allow my will to be "frozen" in indecision by an emotional fear of the future, or by a "what if" doubt concerning the present. I also was confronted by something else which I had never quite allowed to play a role in my fight against doubt before: I knew then that I was in love with Jesus. The moment that truth dawned on me, my struggle took on an entirely new dimension.

But my point here is that such a position of personal trust is not illogical; it is actually warranted by the data itself. Just as the initial decision was based on the facts, the resultant personal relationship is also, for one realizes that continuing and deepening commitment is based on what one knows about the Person. It is true of personal relationships in everyday life, as well.

A third reason to trust Jesus in the face of any new objections is that other formerly unexplained problems have since been dealt with sufficiently. What constitutes such issues are frequently person-related, indicating that individuals may have different examples in mind, but it is still true that many have been solved. To cite our own subjects in an earlier chapter, perhaps questions about Jesus' death or resurrection have bothered some believers; others may have wondered how it can be known that Jesus claimed to be deity. But the point is that the more one personally discovers answers to quandaries, the more one realizes that Jesus has proven trustworthy in the past. This should inspire more faith in believers, just like finding several times that my wife was trustworthy should enhance our relationship.

So to answer our initial query concerning why a believer should continue to trust Jesus Christ even in the presence of some unexplained, perhaps even contrary data, we have noted three responses. The central foundation for Christian Theism (as seen in the facts of the gospel) is proven to be firm. In light of this, other difficult data can be given a possible explanation or judgment may even be suspended, as scientific methodology also allows. Additionally, the believer's relationship is a personal one, demanding trust even beyond the initial evidence itself. Lastly, many potentially troublesome issues have been largely solved, contributing to the major conclusion that He has already proven to be trustworthy.

## 2. How Faith Might Be Increased

After attempting to lay a foundation for why a believer should continue to trust Jesus Christ even during times of uncertainty, we will now make a couple of suggestions as to how such faith might be exercised further. Two such points will be mentioned here.

First, one can sometimes get the impression that there is a misunderstanding of the nature of faith among some Christians who appear to understand it as sort of a “weaker sister” to the facts; as a passive “given” which simply occurs on cue after the data has been ascertained. Actually, while it is true that faith is based on the facts, this does not make it one iota less crucial, for the data of the gospel message and one’s trust are equally important.

Additionally, faith is active, especially in that its chief importance is to personally trust the Jesus Christ of the facts. And here it should be pointed out that the New Testament term (*pisteuo*) is a very strong word compared to its English equivalent, indicating a commitment or surrender of oneself. In this case the yielding is to the Person of Jesus Christ.

And while lost Christians probably agree with this usage of faith, they often don’t seem to realize that there is a further activity of faith: its ability to appropriate the truth so as to control doubts. We may recall Lewis’ words at this juncture that, “Faith, in the sense in which I am here using the word, is the art of holding on to things your reason has once accepted, in spite of your changing moods.”<sup>27</sup> Thus, one place to start in an attempt to increase faith is to realize the potential that it has and that which it can accomplish. By a personal appropriation of the facts, which reason itself can never do, a believer’s faith can be trained to stand firm.

Second, a technique which may be very helpful in increasing faith is to be applied during a period of doubt. In our treatment of emotional uncertainty it was suggested that the believer needs to actually practice both praise and thanksgiving, on the one hand, and faith on the other, while one is experiencing uncertainty. Thus, even the time when one feels the most unsure of his belief is an excellent opportunity to affirm that very trust. And such practice involves truth-telling, as well, since we are actually asserting our belief both to God and to ourselves. What one, in essence, is telling the Lord is that, “I still believe in you during the times when I don’t feel good and even when I can’t presently see my way out of my uncertainty.”

Of course, some may object that if one isn’t sure of the factual basis, then affirming one’s faith may have little real affect. But it must be remembered that this chapter is a treatment of volitional doubt. Factual objections are handled in a different manner, as pointed out in Chapter [Part] 3. Thus, if the doubts in question are factual, a study of the data may be necessary. But if the factual foundation is realized, then affirming faith during doubt is an excellent method to confront volitional uncertainty and so encourage that faith to grow.

I think that there are several benefits of such an affirmation, such as our demonstrating that we are not relying on our feelings, that we are really serious about correcting our doubt and that we are willing to obey God in offering thanks and

praise during our difficult times (Phil. 4:6, 8). But for our purposes here, another major benefit is that such actually allows our faith to grow by teaching us that we can practice it during the really difficult times. We will have placed (and properly so) our wills above our feelings. And after such practice, we awake to the realization that our faith has in fact grown, as revealed by our readiness to trust more readily the next time we doubt.

Two biblical illustrations aptly point out these lessons. Job suffered much pain and yet it was right in the middle of his hurting that he learned to trust God (Job 38-42). Even though he still did not understand why he suffered like he did, Job learned that God was trustworthy. As a result, he responded during his uncertainty (Job 40:3-5; 42:1-6) and found victory (42:7-17).

Paul tells us that Abraham believed God's promise that he would have a child in spite of his age and that of Sarah, his wife (Rom. 4:18-25). So while he could not see God's promise, he still trusted the One who had shown Himself to be trustworthy. In fact, he did so in this instance even when all the evidence appeared to point against him (v. 18)! As a result, Abraham's faith blossomed into a life of trust (Heb. 11:8-12, 17-19).

Christians can grow in faith in a similar manner. Like Job and Abraham, believers know enough about God to trust Him in issues where we are not sure of the answers. In the words of a great devotional writer of the last generation, it is right during our times of struggle and doubt that we, too, can experience the victory of our faith. F. B. Meyer recommends this prayer to God during these times of uncertainty:

My God, the spring tide of emotion has passed away like a summer brook; but in my heart of hearts, in my will, Thou Knowest I am as devoted, as loyal, as desirous to be only for Thee, as in the blessed moment of unbroken retirement at Thy feet.<sup>28</sup>

So must the believer pursue the growth of his faith even during times of doubt. In fact, it is during these periods when one can perhaps most effectively develop it by being willing to praise, thank and trust God even when there is no easy answer. Such practice allows God to work in us while we learn of our dependence upon Him.

#### **D. Doubt Prevention**

All the way throughout this entire section of the book we have presented descriptions of and strategies for conquering various types of doubt. But here we wish to view the overall issue from a different angle. The best approach to doubt is one which practices Christian living in such a way so as to prevent uncertainty ahead of time. Just as preventative medicine is rightly stressed by the medical community, so doubt prevention ought to be stressed by believers. In other words, Christians ought to be practicing "positive spiritual health" techniques before uncertainty strikes as a means not only of providing a barrier against doubt but also in the interest of cultivating the broader spiritual life, as well.

Another way to view this suggestion is by recognizing that regular Christian activities such as prayer, Bible reading and study, fellowship and witnessing about

our faith to others have a crucial added dimension not normally appreciated: fighting uncertainty. We might also repeat here Lewis' assertion that practices such as these on a daily basis also serve to build up faith so that it, too, might habitually react in a biblical manner.<sup>29</sup> While I am far from an expert in the application of these areas, I would like to just briefly mention a few suggestions, followed by a brief treatment of another Christian discipline which is seldom recognized for its value and distinction.

With regard to prayer, several items are crucial but appear to be mentioned comparatively seldom; and each has to do with Christian "truth-telling." Prayer is a personal venture; as such it demands that certain conditions be met. The Scripture requires at least previous confession of sin (Ps. 66:18; 1 Jn. 1:9), obedience (Jn. 15:7; 1 Jn. 3:22), praying in Jesus' name (Jn. 16:23; 14:13, 14) and according to God's will (1 Jn. 5:14, 15). Faith in God is also needed (Js. 1:5-8; Mk. 11:24). But the way prayer is sometime practiced, Christians prefer to ignore or downplay the relationship while demanding answers. We claim that we are not treating God as a spiritual slot-machine but our methods often betray us. Would our loved ones be satisfied with the same amount of time and effort which we often devote to our relationship with God?

Two other brief misbeliefs concerning prayer are that God almost always answered prayer in biblical times and that He does not answer it as frequently for us today. But the biblical record simply shows that the first notion does not take account of the many times when biblical authors report unanswered prayer (in their terms!) and the rather sizeable periods of time when God was more-or-less silent in His communication with His people. This does not criticize the God of the universe; it only corrects a common misbelief.<sup>30</sup> Concerning answered prayer today, I think it is undeniable that rather fantastic answers occur regularly. But Christians interested in personal responses would do well to give attention to both the quality of the time spent with the Lord (He is a personal Being also!) and begin keeping a record of their prayers (and those of others) which were answered. Nothing corrects the second misbelief as quickly as a black-and-white list which contradicts the assumption itself.

More briefly, Bible reading and study can also serve as a crucially important roadblock to doubt. But as Guinness reminds us, we must be willing to give God's Word more concentration than we frequently do, being willing to sit under its judgment and being more receptive in its application to our lives.<sup>31</sup> Fellowship with believers and our witness to non-believers are also central in our overall plan. With regard to the former, social and emotional reinforcement are so vital to our continuing growth and fellowship helps to provide these needs; we are often oblivious to the opposite affects in our lives which contribute to the occurrence of doubt. With the latter, not only is it a chief means by which others are led by the Holy Spirit into God's blessings, but it likewise assists us in realizing anew that God still works in lives even today.

So in our attempt to prevent doubt ahead of time, we will close by remembering two truths. The overall emphasis of such preventive measures is the continual cultivation of a personal relationship with a personal God, spurred on by the practice not

only of these spiritual disciplines, but also of the appropriate techniques for the treatment of each of the major species of doubt, which has been the subject of much of this volume. We must not fail to work on the first (as indicated in this section) and not be weary in the repeated renewal of the second. I think that these are keys to doubt prevention. Now we will turn to another spiritual discipline which can uniquely address each of these concerns, including the controlling of uncertainty, but which is largely a “lost art” among Christians today.<sup>32</sup>

## **E. Biblical Meditation**

It is perhaps true that various forms of Eastern meditation techniques are better known in the West than are biblical methods. The former is a very broad category which generally emphasizes the emptying of one’s mind of typical thought patterns, the disuse of reason and concentration on a word or puzzle which is supposed to be helpful in the achieving of a new level of consciousness.<sup>33</sup> On the other hand, the biblical pattern emphasizes what is frequently almost the opposite: the filling of the believer’s mind by the thoughtful contemplation of any of a number of God’s truths.<sup>34</sup>

Scripture (and Psalms, in particular) relates many details concerning meditation. As to its method, individuals apparently practiced it alone<sup>35</sup> by single-minded concentration on a particular theme.<sup>36</sup> Repetition of such thoughts was also normal fare.<sup>37</sup>

The most common topic mentioned in Scripture for the person’s meditation is God’s Law or His words. Various other themes include the attributes of God, His creation and works, His miracles, His promises, eternal life, and other edifying thoughts. In this last category, it is praiseworthy thinking, in particular, which is stressed.<sup>38</sup> But it should be remembered that picturing God Himself in our meditation is simply constructing an idol of Him. Thus, visualizing God is a form of idolatry (Ex. 20:4-6).

Wonderful blessings are promised to those who meditate. We are told that practitioners can receive guidance, protection, success, prospering, wisdom, understanding, and knowledge.<sup>39</sup>

So how should the believer today practice meditation? McCormick and Fish suggest concentrating single mindedly on one of the many themes which believers have from which to choose; rotating them on a daily (or otherwise regular) basis produces not only variety but also the opportunity to grow in several different areas. They not only briefly describe the process in biblical terms, but also provide numerous examples of content for possible meditation sessions.<sup>40</sup>

In terms of the subject of doubt in general (and its prevention in particular), meditation remains a powerful but largely unpracticed procedure. By its daily use, it certainly has the potential to transform lives. I personally could not recommend a better means not only to regularly review the actual strategies for controlling doubt, such as those outlined in this volume, but also to draw closer to God. In other words, one can actually review the biblical steps for combating uncertainty during meditation. It could well be the single “missing ingredient” in many Christian lives today.

## F. Conclusion

In a lecture on the relationship between the believer's intellect and faith, Francis Schaeffer points out that the major problem is not whether there is enough evidence for Christianity, for there is plenty of such data. Rather, the real issue, Schaeffer explains, is whether we believe God in spite of the proof. In other words, evidence not only doesn't force faith, but for some it may even be a facade in that a continual search for such facts hides the need to let faith grow. God wants us to believe in Him continually, at every moment, both when we are exuberant and when we are despondent, as well as at other times. So even when we are psychologically beaten, we must continue to believe in God, especially during those times when we do not even know the source of our troubles.<sup>41</sup>

The believer's faith needs to grow, most particularly during periods of doubt. So Christians need to be strengthened beyond the point where, as a colleague once remarked, their faith is dependent on the latest archaeological discovery. Accordingly, this chapter has attempted to set forth principles to remedy this situation. But it must be remembered here that it is God's power which is the key: believer's wills ought to be brought into conformity with His will.

I have suggested that the individual suffering volitional doubt begin with a commitment to God (including repentance, if necessary), next applying the principles of Misbelief Therapy (as explained in Chapter 4). One of the most important steps is the challenging of one's faith to view reality from God's eternal perspective. A heavenly motivation should assist us in the internalizing of God's reasons for action, making these reasons our own. Lastly, faith in Jesus Christ as a Person must be further activated.

It was suggested that the last point can be facilitated by both realizing that believers already have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and by cultivating those ties. In fact, the best time to develop such faith could paradoxically be right during one's doubts.

Once doubt is dealt with, the best long-term remedy is to practice a biblical pattern of doubt-prevention. Such should not only involve the regular Christian practices of prayer, Bible study, fellowship and witnessing, but these should be joined by biblical meditation. And in each of these, part of the focus should explicitly be on the continual review of various patterns for controlling doubt, such as those described in this volume. Practice is essential, as well.

Of course, as human beings it is not always easy to work on problems and repeatedly deal with painful issues. But we said earlier that the regular testimony of those who practice such exercises is that, when properly applied, there is much relief; when such is not done, problems frequently remain. So while discipline is not always easy, it is crucially important. As Backus explains:

The self-controlled person maintains progress toward a goal even when he is not in the mood, doesn't feel like making the effort, would momentarily enjoy something else, or finds working toward his goal downright unpleasant.<sup>42</sup>

If doubt is handled in a biblical manner,<sup>43</sup> peace can definitely be the result. And

as we have said, peace is obtained through a decision (cf. Rom. 15:13), so it can remain in spite of one's outward circumstances. Any new problems or challenges to the presence of this peace can also be treated by proper identification followed by an application of appropriate biblical remedies, whether those described here or others.

## Notes

- 1 Although these statements might be said about the unbeliever who refuses to trust Jesus Christ (and this would still be a volitional issue), it should be remembered that we are primarily writing to (and about) Christians who still experience volitional problems.
- 2 Backus, *Finding the Freedom of Self-Control*, p. 11. Actually, Backus begins this volume with this concern.
- 3 For examples of the many such references, see Rom. 12:1-2; Gal. 6:4-5, 9-10; Heb. 10:36; Js. 4:4-10; 1 Pet. 5:7-11; 2 Pet. 3:18; 1 Jn. 2:3-6; 2 Jn. 9; Rev. 22:7.
- 4 See especially 2 Cor. 4:5, 7; 10:3-6; 12:9-10; Gal 2:20; 5:16-26; Eph. 6:10-18; Phil. 2:12-13; 4:13; 1 Pet. 1:18-25; 1 Jn. 3:23-24.
- 5 Backus, p. 16.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 172.
- 7 Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, p. 124.
- 8 Again, since this is written to the believer, we are not speaking of the initial experience of salvation but a re- commitment of one's will to the Lord (cf. Rom. 12:1-2; Eph. 5:18).
- 9 Backus, especially pp. 158-161.
- 10 See Chapter 4, Section C and Backus and Chapien, especially Chapters 1-4, 6.
- 11 This is the title given by Backus and Chapien, p. 10.
- 12 We have already cited J. I. Packer's volume, *Knowing God*, which is described by the author as a book of meditations on this subject (pp. 7, 17). See also R. C. Sproul, *The Holiness of God* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1985).
- 13 See Herbert Lockyer, *Portraits of the Savior* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Publishers, 1983).
- 14 Peter J. Kreeft, *Heaven: The Heart's Deepest Longing* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1980), pp. 22-27 for example.
- 15 Again, see Matt. 6:19-34; 2 Cor. 4:6-5:10; Phil. 3:18-21; Col. 3:1-4; Heb. 10:34-35; 11:13-16; 1 Pet. 1:3-9; 5:7-11; 1 Jn. 3:1-3.
- 16 Guinness, pp. 33-34.
- 17 Elmer Towns, *Say-It-Faith* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1983), pp. 61-73, 112-120. The author makes it plain throughout the book that the title is not to be taken in the sense of either positive thinking or of the "health-wealth gospel."
- 18 *Ibid.*, Chapter Eleven.
- 19 Backus, pp. 153-157.
- 20 In fact, such goals are the specific purpose of Backus' book (*Ibid.*).
- 21 This essay is contained in C. S. Lewis, *The World's Last Night and Other Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1960), pp. 13-30. For this quotation, see p. 23.
- 22 *Ibid.*, pp. 25-26.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 16.
- 24 *Ibid.*, pp. 23-25.
- 25 *Ibid.*, p. 29.
- 26 For an excellent treatment of the relationship between scientific models and anomalies and how the latter are treated in scientific theory, see J.P. Moreland, "The Rationality of Belief in Inerrancy," *Trinity Journal*, NS (1986), pp. 75-86.
- 27 Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, p. 123.
- 28 F.B. Meyer, *The Secret of Guidance* (Chicago: Moody Press, n.d.), pp. 25-26.
- 29 Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, p. 124.
- 30 A later chapter in this book addresses these subjects.

- 31 Guinness, pp. 147-149.
- 32 This is Packer's description (see *Knowing God*, p. 18).
- 33 For a further explanation of such notions and a critique of them, see Pat Means, *The Mystical Maze* (U.S.: Campus Crusade for Christ, 1976); Douglas R. Groothuis, *Unmasking the New Age* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1986); Gordon R. Lewis, *What Everyone Should Know About Transcendental Meditation* (Glendale: Regal Books, 1975); David K. Clark, *The Pantheism of Alan Watts* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1978).
- 34 For some of the biblical distinctions, see Thomas McCormick and Sharon Fish, *Meditation: A Practical Guide to a Spiritual Discipline* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1983).
- 35 See Gen. 24:63; Ps. 63:6; 77:2; 119:148.
- 36 Ps. 62:1, 5, 6, 11-12; 77:1-3, 12, 119:15; cf. Ps. 27:4; 73:25; 103:1-5; Matt. 6:33.
- 37 Ps. 77:3, 5, 11-12; Phil. 4:8-9.
- 38 Many biblical passages deal with the proper topics for a believer's meditation. Related terms such as "seek" or "desire" can also denote such themes for concentration. Believers should meditate on God's law and precepts (Josh. 1:8; Ps. 1:2; 119:15, 23, 48, 78, 97, 99; cf. Pro. 2:1-5; 6:20-23; Js. 1:23-25), His Person (Ps. 27:4; 63:1-7; 73:25-26, although picturing God in our imagination is strictly forbidden in Scripture—Ex. 20:4-6), His creation (Ps. 104:24, 31-34; 143:5-6; 145:4-5), His mighty works or miracles (Ps. 77:12; 119:27), His promises (Ps. 119:148), eternal life (cf. Ps. 73:24-26; Matt 6:33) or other edifying and praiseworthy thoughts (Phil. 4:8-9).
- 39 See Josh. 1:8; Ps. 1:1-3; 119:1-16, 97-100; Pro. 2:1-5; 6:20-22.
- 40 McCormick and Fish, pp. 9-14, 35-36, 94-95 for examples. It should be very carefully noticed that there is a difference between the biblical imagery for meditation and man-made images (Ex. 20:4-6) which must be avoided (cf. pp. 67-68).
- 41 Tape: Francis Schaeffer, "The Intellectual (Proof) and Faith," n.d.
- 42 Backus, p. 36.
- 43 With the exception of Phil. 4:6-9, it is not being claimed here that the psychological or other strategies presented here are synonymous with biblical truth. But we have strived to present remedies which are biblical, nonetheless.