

INTRODUCTION

The possibility of faith means that the human personality makes meaningful choices and weighs options in the making of those choices.

There are many evidences that conspire in favor of and/or against faith in God so that an individual either trusts or doubts. The choice is never made in isolation from the whole context of life. This contextual fact gives the three studies doubt an earthy relevance in that each of these men Peter, Thomas, John, faced the crises of faith and doubt from within a concrete and distinctive situation.

These three studies in doubt are dedicated to the student generation, and all who wonder secretly and aloud about everything.

I

JOHN THE BAPTIST

Have you ever doubted God; have you angrily confirmed to yourself enough evidences that demanded the doubt of God's sheer reality or what is perhaps worse his love, his justice? The kind of doubt I mean is primarily moral; it is founded upon disappointment in God. It is not so much the question of his existence that needs confirmation but the more serious question: his responsibility for history and to history. John the Baptist became such a man at the most crucial moment of life.

Here is a strong-willed man, a man with a cause. He is a mystic in the greatest tradition of the Biblical prophets, a wilderness man who had refused the comparative security of the priestly role within institutional religion in order to speak with freedom and integrity to the whole cultural situation of first century Palestine. He is himself a moral figure of unquestioned stature and as a prophet he fulfilled the aspiration of every prophet in anointing the Messiah himself, Jesus, the Lamb of God. John was so sure of that Jesus that he was willing to commend his own followers to follow him and to himself plant every hope in that Christ. John was certain that Jesus would be the change in the ages, the one who would personally sweep away the old order and bring in the new. John was completely convinced that Jesus was the Christ of God. "He must increase. I must decrease.

But now in one split second everything is in danger and John is himself the victim of the whim of little, petty people who hold the political power of Herod's Monarchy. It is a bitter irony that at many moments in history the little, trivial people seem to be in control of the symbols of public power. Many men like John the Baptist have been swallowed up by the lethal tragedy of such moments. This personal crises stirs up within his deepest self overwhelming doubt toward the friend that he had trusted so totally. And there is still a more troubling reason for doubt. Not only is John personally in danger but his cause is also shaken to its foundation. Christ was to have established peace and prophetic justice and the reign of Almighty God so that all the meaninglessness of men's corrupt forms would be shattered. But there are no results and months have passed since Jordan. His own imprisonment in Herod's dungeon is symbolic to him therefore of the weakness of that certitude that he had loved and upon which he had wagered everything.

Here is a profoundly deep man whose doubts are of the gravest substance.

He once believed so much and now doubts everything to the core. Some people doubt God as casually as they doubt the ten day weather forecast. They never really ever believed anything so far ahead anyway so the doubt came easily. Such doubts like the doubt of God grounded in a distaste for Noah's ark and the animals two by two only engage the surface. John's doubts are more important than that because he really loved Jesus of Nazareth and trusted as greatly as a man can honestly trust. Now he questions everything:

- (1) His own earlier convictions and announcements "Behold the Lamb of God who taketh away the sin of the world."
- (2) Christ himself, the one in whom he believed.

In this dark mood John sends his disciples to Jesus with the plaintive question: "Are you he who is to come or should we look for another?" John is the father of all who ever doubted* because there are not men who have ever doubted more deeply. And yet in the midst of his skepticism he remains the great man. "Should we look for another?" John intends to search on to find the Messiah. He is broken but not empty. His wager still holds true and he remains committed

to truth, and committed to the fact that God must somehow, somewhere show himself. He intends to keeping up the search as long as he lives and questions can well up in his chest. John's doubts are not evasive or entertaining questions asked over a beer to enliven a dull evening. Here is doubt that calls out for truth to justify itself if it can. If John's question is unanswered then all of life is pointless after all.

John is also the father of all who ever had faith. Mixed inseparably within his agonizing doubt is faith in its most costly form. John does not cry out his question impersonally, shouting over his guitar at the paying customers, but to the only one he can trust with such a question - Jesus of Nazareth himself. He, at this last hard moment of his life, knows that only one man will understand his fear and his question. John trusts Christ with the question. He asks Christ to speak for himself and this is faith in its most generic form. In fact there and more genuine belief in this basic encounter between beaten John the Baptist and Jesus Christ than in most of the evasive adoration of religious flattery that has flooded Christendom since that honest hour. In this unforgettable event once and for all it was settled that men could openly announce to God their real feelings without fakery or assumed piety and the God of truth could in such encounters bring resolution with liberating integrity. "It is good to be weary and worn out in the vain pursuit of the true god so that we may open our arms to the redeemer."
Pascal.

What does Jesus do with John the Baptist's question? "In that hour he healed..." Jesus acted in behalf of particular men. The Christ who is "word and work" becomes both to John and in first order he is event to John. He does on an individual and personal scale the vast things John expected. He does take hold of the hurtful empires of this age and sweeps them away, not in impressive program of impersonal magnitude but where mercy and truth count most, in individual and particular instances. (This is the deepest meaning of all of Jesus' miracles of healing.) Jesus gets in dangerously close to suffering, evil, pain, grief, poverty not by public pronouncement but by individual encounter. He touched the leper. He forgave the non-forgivable. Finally, soon after John's death, Jesus was to

* Note Thieliicke's development of this thesis in Christ and the Meaning of Life.

take these murderous realities actually and concretely upon himself. This is the Lord's reply to John! Simply and quietly his own sheer presence in the midst of tragedies like the one John was suffering.

Then without pretense Jesus quotes to the mystified disciples of John the amazing words of Isaiah, "then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert..." "Tell John this" Jesus speaks to that rugged Prophet in the words of another concentration camp prophet. How sensitive the Lord is to the feelings and needs of men. John will understand because he too is a prophet, and a greater one than Isaiah.

The words for each man differ which itself is symbolic of the integrity of men and God. We find it hard to really understand Jesus' words to John as the stagehands in Macleash's J.B. John the Baptist's disciples cannot understand John the Baptist's resolution, but John understood them and mixed with the Lord's acts they resolved his question. The fact is timeless that the deepest reply to man's moral doubt of Jesus Christ is the sheer presence of Christ himself as word and work, gospel and event. The man who greatly doubts God should cry out his distinctive question to God himself and the God who knows our names will speak for himself in terms that we can understand.

II

THOMAS

Here is a different sort of man than John the Baptist. Whereas the Baptizer is an awesome and impressive figure upon the Biblical scene, Thomas is quieter and in fact except for sketchy sentences here and there he is hardly noticed in the New Testament accounts. But the fourth gospel presents a very touching and brief encounter of this Thomas with his doubts and his Lord. The narrative is John 20:24-31:

"Now Thomas, one of the twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and place my finger in the mark of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe."

The ten other disciples have seen Jesus in his resurrection triumph and they are satisfied that Christ indeed is alive and victorious over death. For some unexplained reason Thomas was not with them on that Easter Sunday and when these friends tell him the good news of their discovery he refuses to believe them. Carefully consider his doubt; it is an example of genuine intellectual skepticism in its most common form.

Thomas' doubt is not of Christ but of the disciples' witness. It is their experience and their witness that he questions. Christ, he will believe in; make no mistake about that! He insists that the historic, actual Jesus of Nazareth that he personally knew be for him the Christ of faith and nothing other than this will do! Thomas is taking no chances on an apparition or ghost, or "spiritual" experience. For Thomas only the actual, concrete Christ is Lord. He demands the Lord of real history and is not satisfied to build upon even

"spiritual" realities that are divorced from life. In effect Thomas is saying to the disciples: "I followed a man named Jesus for three years and I loved that man, I saw him die at a real moment, a shattering and concrete moment in real history, and I will worship that Christ but no other Christ. If that man is alive, that man who suffered I will believe that there is a gospel but I must be sure that it is in truth that Jesus who is Lord. No other Lord will do, not even if God should send a ghost or spirit to us."

Thomas has posed the classic intellectual question: Is Jesus of Nazareth the Christ of faith? Who is it that Christianity worships? Has Christ been really vindicated? Has concrete history been in fact radically intersected? If the Jesus who spoke at Galilee and who died at Jerusalem really lives now and reigns and empowers his gospel of life in the world of reality then history has been really met with the radically new. But if the disciples have in their grief been charmed by their own wishful hopes or by perchance some spiritual forces mysteriously at work in and around the world then nothing really new has happened. Why gamble your life on such a minor fact or certitude as that?

There is no other philosophical question as central as Thomas' doubt to the whole overwhelming contention that lies at the heart of the gospel--that this Jesus Christ whom John the Baptist called the Lamb of God is in fact all that Prophets ever hoped for and more, He is Almighty God speaking for Himself in history.

When modern man has doubts he does well to synthesize the range of questions that run through his mind into a serious grappling of this most crucial of all issues--the one Thomas posed "I must be sure that Jesus Christ is who he said he was and that it is He that inspires the faith of my ten fellow disciples and not some other possibility. Of this I must be sure enough to wager everything."

"Eight days later the disciples are again in the Upper Room and Thomas is with them." This sentence fascinates me! Eight days of unresolved, confusing, increasing doubt must have been for Thomas and his friends like agonizing years of tension and crises. This brief sentence in John's gospel tells me something about Thomas and the Disciples and the way they faced up to the problem of doubt.

I. Though Thomas doubts the disciples' affirmation he refuses three obvious lures:

(1) He rejects the easy protective tarrif of cynicism. After 8 days of doubt he still remains with the disciples, still asking his hard and impossible question, quizing their experience, trying hard to understand them and make sense of their witness, yet still unsure. But there is not the slightest hint that Thomas adopted the cheap escape of mockery or flippancy. These corrosive defense mechanisms are inviting options when a man is troubled by phenomena that he cannot avoid. It costs nothing but the decision to reduce the disciples witness into a ridiculous dimension, and perhaps support the cynical conclusion with various, easily provided evidences. C. S. Lewis' charming screwtape devilishly advises his assistant Wormwood to encourage such a stance for troubled modern man:

"But flippancy is the best of all. In the first place it is very economical. Only a clever human can make a real joke about virtue, or indeed about anything else; any of them can be trained to talk as if virtue were funny. Among flippant people the joke is always assumed to have been made. No one actually makes it; but every serious subject is discussed in a manner which implies that they

have already found a ridiculous side to it. If prolonged, the habit of Flippancy builds up around a man the finest armour-plating against the enemy that I know, and it is quite free from the dangers inherent in the other sources of laughter. It is a thousand miles away from joy: it deadens, instead of sharpening, the intellect; and it excites no affection between those who practice it."

(2) The second lure Thomas refuses to follow is to dishonestly adopt the faith of the disciples for any of many possible reasons--to please his friends, or to play it safe with the odds, or in order to be "positive", etc. Thomas refuses to be anything but what he really is, which means standing by without the resolution and confidence that the disciples possessed. But his decision in favor of honest self-hood will be crucial. If this new covenant is really true and if it will deserve the telling to all of the cities of the world then it must be true, not apparently true or wishfully true, or even deservably true. He does well to insist upon truth that is total.

(3) Eight days later and Thomas is still with the disciples. He refuses the most obvious solution to his troublesome doubt. He will not leave these friends who do believe. He stays with the community of belief though not really a part of it heart and being. Many times in a sensitive man's life he wonders if it would not be better for all concerned if he were not around continually raising the difficult questions, even by his physical presence. But now is no time for Thomas to leave. Solutions to life's gravest issues are never discovered in a vacuum. His best chance to find the deepest and most genuine resolution to his life will be with the concrete relationships of his life, where he knows and is known.

II. The disciples also face equally tempting lures in the face of their doubting companion and their choices are worth considering too.

(1) The most obvious solution to this melancholy Thomas is to expell him from the disciples' band and thereby consolidate the comradeship. The betrayal of Judas certainly would have made them jumpy and more cautious toward each other. We would expect that a movement could logically develop among the 10 to rid themselves of this evidently unstable and non-believing Thomas. But they do not take this way. Eight days later and Thomas is still with them; he is a hindrance to their enthusiasm and the continuous reminder to them of the possibility that they are the ones who are mistaken. It is to the credit of these ten men that they are able to accept Thomas for what he is and the way he is. They are themselves secure enough in Christ and their discovery of his reality that they can endure the skeptic. It is a fair assessment to make that the inability of Christians to accept in their midst the man in the crises of his faith is a sign of a low sense of certitude on the part of the Christians themselves. The greater the actual confidence that the Church feels regarding Christ's reality the more secure it is in the encounter with opposition, doubt and apathy.

(2) Secondly there is not the slightest evidence of any attempts upon their part to coerce Thomas into the position of the believer. They want him to believe but the ten men know the limits that are deeply implied in the gospel. The community of faith obviously has a persuasive influence upon the individual but the crucial influence must be God himself. We bear witness to our discovery but God must authenticate himself. They realized this limitation and so avoided foolish proofs or any social, group pressures, all of which would attempt to conform Thomas. Pascal recongnizes three sources for faith--what he calls: reason, custom and inspiration. Faith makes sense because it is reasonable, and the community

of believers encourage us to believe but he wisely observes "we are not true children without inspiration, no escaping the cross". In other words God himself must settle Thomas' probing questions and not the disciples. There is a liberation for the Church in knowing of this limitation. It protects from "Saviour complexes" and deadly paternalism. This means that there are no intellectual proofs of God and the Church has been itself in error whenever it proposed to prove God to the world. He must speak for himself and he does.

(3) Thirdly we get no hints that the disciples took Thomas and his question lightly which would have been the Church playing the role of cynic. Especially when the Church has been strong and respected there is the temptation to escape the troublesome issues that this thoughtful friend is raising by casually bypassing the sincerity and seriousness of the question and questioner. Have you ever conversed with someone who never really hears what you are saying and in fact only waits for the pauses so that he can interject his previously prepared speech. How unlike this is Jesus of Nazareth! In every gospel account one fact is deeply impressive about Jesus' relationships with people; He gives to each encounter his full attention. His sensitivity to people and their contextual whole within which they live is remarkable. Remember Nicodemus, the Pharisees in Luke 15, the young man in Mark 10. The fact of John's recording of Thomas and his question reveals the seriousness with which this lone disciple is taken by his comrades. The friends cannot really solve the massive questions, and who after all can really satisfactorily answer the deepest questions, but they take the questions seriously and struggle for eight days with them.

Eight days and Jesus Christ himself uniquely settled the overwhelming intellectual questions of Thomas.

It is important to note that when the moments of resolution came to Thomas he does not finally need the terms as he had stated them to the disciples. He insisted on touching the wounds of his Lord but in that unforgettable moment of his life he did not need to touch Jesus. But his question was settled and he became convinced that the Jesus of history was indeed the Christ of victory. I think this fact is true in every man's journey to faith. What "proofs" we think that we must have often become themselves trite and meaningless when we are really confronted with the reality of the Christ of the gospel. God has moved down to

a deeper and more generic center of our lives than our little questions ever fathomed. This happened to Thomas when he encountered the fact of the victory of Christ.

In that culminating hour of resolution the hesitant disciple fell to the earth with the greatest affirmation of faith that is found anywhere in the Bible-- "My Lord and my God". He bypasses the messianic formulas such as Peter had quoted at Caesaria-Philippi, "Thou art the Christ the Son of the living God". Thomas' words are unique and profoundly personal. The doubts of this amazing individual resulted in our great favour as have the doubts of other men as well. Thomas insisted on the concrete Christ and settled for us that during resurrection week at least one man raised that central and all important historical issue. Therefore his honest doubt has become the purging lens through which our faith in Christ has been clearer and more decisive. Jesus Christ was able to confirm himself to Thomas and because he was convinced many have been blessed from that moment on.

III

PETER

John the Baptist because of disappointment doubted Christ; Thomas' doubt is not so much of Christ as it was of the statement of Christ's disciples. Now, there is the terrible and debilitating doubt of the New Testament's greatest disciple, Peter.

Peter had achieved the greatest height in leadership so that Christ singled out his name as the symbol of that upon which the Church would be founded. Peter had shown the strongest faith; He alone had walked on water. Peter was bravest and carried a sword to prove it in the garden of Gethsemane. Then on that swift-moving Thursday night this man fell to the very bottom. He denied everything; he became the coward that took everyone by surprise, so that when he collapsed every friend of the prisoner ran in disarray.

But Golgotha is over and Jesus has won without the aid of his men. The disciples are grateful for the victory and even Thomas is assured. Yet one man is still battling with doubt, perhaps the worst of all doubts. Peter's doubt is not like the righteous indignation of John the Baptist--or the intellectual questions of Thomas. Peter is faced with the doubt of himself. Peter doubts his courage, he doubts his conviction, his leadership, his worth. How could he ever trust himself again? These are suicidal doubts and constitute the most fearful doubt syndrome that man ever experiences. As a matter of fact most other forms of skepticism have their roots at least in part in this internalized fear of the self.

There are hints in the gospel records that Peter, great and massive a man as he was, had begun to journey in just that direction. "Simon Peter said to them, 'I am going fishing'. They said to him, 'We will go with you'." The disciples loved him wisely at this lonely moment in his existence and they refuse to strand him even when he wanted to be free of them. They could not settle Peter's doubt of himself but they could go fishing with him.

As with Thomas and John the Baptist it is Christ who is alone able to resolve this man's deepest needs. How does Peter's resolution take place?

"Simon Peter said to them, 'I am going fishing'. They said to him, 'We will go with you'. They went out and got into the boat; but that night they caught nothing.

"Just as day was breaking, Jesus stood on the beach; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, 'Children, have you any fish?' They answered him, 'No.' He said to them, 'Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some.' So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in, for the quantity of fish. That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, 'It is the Lord!' When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his clothes, for he was stripped for work, and sprang into the sea. But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, but about a hundred yards off.

"When they got out on land, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish lying on it, and bread...

"When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?' He said to him, 'Yes Lord; you know that I love you.' He said to him, 'Feed my lambs.' A second time he said to him, 'Simon, son of John, do you love me?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' He said to him, 'Tend my sheep.' He said to him the third time, 'Simon, son

of John, do you love me?' Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, 'Do you love me?' And he said to him, 'Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my sheep.'

John 21:3-17

(1) First Jesus finds Peter. At the core of the Christian gospel is the radical affirmation that God himself in his son has broken through into man's historic existence to find him. This is how precious man is to his creator and Peter was to learn that this divine affection could find him as well.

(2) Jesus fed him. The charcoal fire is not only a concrete event for the fishermen, it is deeply symbolic. These men and Peter especially needed to be inwardly supported. The human ego must be healthily fed with substance. It is not God's will that men should languish in the valley of humiliation and brokenness and Jesus proves it on this early morning encounter. The charcoal fire pointed up to them that Almighty God knew of their needs and cared for them in the actual context of the all night spent on the lake.

(3) Following this breakfast together Jesus asks Peter three times "Do you love me?" Many things could be observed of these three questions but the most impressive fact is the most obvious. Jesus places Peter squarely into the present tense. Do you love (present tense) me? How wise Christ is and what an unforgettable demonstration of the realism and liberation of Holy forgiveness. Jesus in these three questions decisively grapples with the disappointing past in Peter's life and prepares his disciple to live in freedom from that past.

(4) "...feed my lambs." Jesus gave Peter something important to do. It is a remarkable fact that Peter is not replaced as public leader of the apostolic band even in view of his public failure. How sure Christ is of himself and his cause that such earthy men as this man are welcome in his strategy for history! Jesus restores Peter to central leadership without condemnation for the past and charges him with a task to do. Peter will gain the decisive victory over doubt enroute as he attempts to fulfill his undershepherd role and really tries to feed the Lord's sheep. Then he will have forgotten himself and his own wasteland and he will have become a part of God's Holy will not only for his life but for the world as well.

IV

POSTSCRIPT

One of Jesus' briefest parables is the following:

"What do you think? A man had two sons; and he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' And he answered, 'I will not;' but afterward he repented and went. And he went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir,' but did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the harlots believed him; and even when you saw it, you did not afterward repent and believe him.

Consider the two brothers; each has his own negative and positive quality.

The first son is impetuous and too quickly hostile to his father's will; the result is that he at first rejects the father's claim upon his life. Contrasted this response the second son instantly assures the father of his obedience. This son is polite and friendly, but he does not actually go to the vineyard which becomes his weakness. He said he would but for some unexplained reason he does not live out his affirmation. The first son said he would not but he repented the first decision and actually went to work, this is his strength.

If you had your pick of the two men which one would you choose? At breakfast when the tasks of the day are under discussion the first son is hard to live with; he is negative and perhaps impudent whereas the second is cooperative, encouraging. But when evening comes the morning evaluations are reversed.

There are at least two simple points the parable makes:

(1) Second thoughts are better than first thoughts. Here is a parable for the doubter. The one son was at first so sure of his negative conclusion but as he thought the whole matter through his father was vindicated to him. C. S. Lewis captures this principle in his brilliant chapter The Grand Miracle in MIRACLES:

"With this our sketch of the Grand Miracle may end. Its credibility does not lie in Obviousness. Pessimism, Optimism, Pantheism, Materialism, all have this "Obvious" attraction. Each is confirmed at the first glance by multitudes of facts: Later on, each meets insuperable obstacles. The doctrine of the Incarnation works into our minds quite differently. It digs beneath the surface, works through the rest of our knowledge by unexpected channels, harmonies best with our deepest apprehensions and our "second thoughts", and in union with these undermines our superficial opinions. It has little to say to the man who is still certain that everything is going to the dogs, or that everything is getting better and better, or that everything is God, or that everything is electricity. Its hour comes when these wholesale creeds have begun to fail us. Whether the thing really happened is a historical question. But when you turn to history, you will not demand for it that kind and degree which you demand for something which, if accepted, illuminates and orders all other phenomena, explains both our laughter and our logic, our fear of the dead and our knowledge that it is somehow good to die, and which at one stroke covers what multitudes of separate theories will hardly cover for us if this is rejected."

The gospel deserves our thoughtful encounter and it is sound advice to encourage an individual who questions either a part or the whole, regardless of the nature and origin of his doubts, to continue his search and probe into the gospel's primary presuppositions and implications.

(2) The second point that the parable makes is this: It is better to finally believe what at first you could not say than to say at first what you will never believe. It may take time and profound struggle of the soul before faith is genuine but every man has his season. The Almighty God of our faith is able to authenticate himself, and he does in terms that are meaningful for us so that our faith is the honest response of our whole life to him.

Faith is the wager of my real self ("body" is the word Paul uses in Romans

•12:1) upon the integrity of Jesus Christ. Not that I have all of the possible facts but I know enough that I am satisfied that Christ deserves my life so that in gratitude I give myself to Him. This is resolution faith that gave John the Baptist his prophetic stature to the end. This is the intellectual certitude that Thomas found and this is what integrated Peter as a whole man.