

REDEEMER

R E P O R T

FEBRUARY 2001

I DOUBT IT

Christians, whether living in the midst of New York City or behind the locked doors of a rural hermitage, are almost daily confronted with their own doubts about the Christian faith or with those of others. Having quick proof texts or sound-bite sized answers is not a solace to some of these gnawing doubts. It is an issue which must be addressed with the completeness due its complexity.

A Balanced Attitude

First, we need to get a balanced attitude towards doubt. Many religious people seem to see doubt as a completely negative thing. Expressions of uncertainty or questions about fundamental teachings are frowned upon as

*"I find your
lack of faith –
disturbing."*

– *Darth Vader*

marks of immaturity. However, Jesus healed the son of the man who said he was filled with "unbelief" (Mark 9:24.) (There is, of course, the opposite error of viewing permanent, intractable spiritual skepticism as a mark of maturity—but more on that later.) Doubts are inevitable and, if handled with integrity, they can be an important means of growth.

A Balanced Diagnosis

Second, we need to see what

BY TIM KELLER

doubt is "made of." Is doubt mainly an intellectual thing? Do we doubt because our intellects are unsatisfied? Or is doubt mainly an emotional thing? Do we doubt because our hearts are afraid to invest in a permanence which may betray its trust?

Actually, doubts are both emotional and rational because nearly all our beliefs are arrived at through a combination of both heart and head. As Aristotle famously said, we are not just persuaded by a speaker with "logos" (good arguments) but also with "pathos" (passion) and "ethos" (personal credibility.) It is wrong then to treat doubts as

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BOOK RECOMMENDATION-SHANTUNG COMPOUND BY LANGTON GILKEY

Out of print for many years, *Shantung Compound* by Langton Gilkey is now available through your favorite Internet book supplier. Why should you care? Well, personally, unless I have a good book waiting for me when I get a quiet moment, I generally walk around experiencing a low level of grief, as if a good friend had moved away and I couldn't get in touch with her. And *Shantung Compound*, among other things, is a very good read, particularly for a cold month like February.

At the beginning of World War II all the foreign businessmen, missionaries and families in northern China were interned in a for-

mer missionary compound outside the village of Shantung. Gilkey makes a point of insisting that they were not subjected to any form of torture or mistreatment. This is not "A *Bridge Over the River Kwai*" kind of book.

However, the deprivations inherent in having 2000 people inadequately fed, clothed and housed in crumbling buildings covering roughly the space of a city block provided a perfect setting to observe the workings of

BY KATHY KELLER

the human heart both individually and corporately.

A believing Christian when first interned, Gilkey at first jettisoned his faith as irrelevant in the face of the truly pressing needs for food, privacy, and the creation of a bare bones civil society. (The behavior of some of the missionaries accelerated his coming to the conclusion that religious commitment meant very little when push truly came

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I DOUBT IT

either merely intellectual or emotional.

Nevertheless, we need to distinguish between particular doubt-cases which may consist of very different percentages of thinking and feeling. Many doubts are mainly a matter of emotion, while others are mainly due to intellectual problems that confront the mind. Several things can trigger a specific "doubt-case": 1) intellectual questions; 2) personal moral failures; 3) experiences of tragedy, injustice or deep disappointment; 4) or disillusionment over the behavior of professed believers—just to name a few. Each situation leads to a doubt-case of different constituent parts.

A Balanced Treatment

Since doubts should be neither repressed nor unchallenged, what sort of balance should we come to with our own doubts and those of others?

1. Gently assess the level of integrity of the emotional compo-

nent of doubt. It is wrong to assume that doubts always or even usually have either cowardice or selfishness at their roots, but the plain fact is that often they do. Aldous Huxley candidly admitted that in college he embraced atheism largely because he wanted the freedom to do whatever he wanted to sexually. Many others need to admit that behind a veneer of intellectual questions is a much stronger reason for doubting—they don't want their friends to laugh at them.

Once I was talking to a college student who said that he could never believe anything the Bible said unless he could find corroborating accounts by secular sources. I asked him if that wouldn't mean that we would have to give most of what we know about antiquity, because Suetonius, Thucydides and Herodotus have no more independent corroborative source material than do the Scriptures. He smiled sheepishly and said, "but if Suetonius is

true or not does not affect me. If the Gospels are true, I'd have to change my life." I think it is obvious that it lacks integrity to hold back from an exploration of the truth claims of Christianity because of fears of what might happen if it DID turn out to be true. Sometimes if we are candid about the emotional reasons that disguise themselves as intellectual objections, we can find our doubts subsiding.

2. Honestly admit the faith-level already present in your intellectual doubts. Many people style themselves as hard-headed skeptics who simply find it difficult to have strong faith in anything. But doubts of Christianity are nearly always disguised strong-faith-in-something-else.

Some examples:

a) *Many people say "I just can't believe that Christianity is superior to the other faiths! Every religion is like a blind man who*

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STILL TIME TO REGISTER FOR NON-SKI GETAWAY

Deadline is February 8

There's still time to register for the Non-Ski Getaway to Vermont over Presidents' Day Weekend, February 16-19. The deadline for registration is February 8.

This long weekend gives you plenty of opportunities to make new friends, especially if you're new to Redeemer, as we toboggan down a hillside, snowshoe through the mountains, play broom ball on a frozen pond (no skates or talent required) or sip hot chocolate in front of a fireplace.

Our group of 70 Redeemerites will virtually take over the Hotel Coolidge, a small, quaint, 1920's hotel in White River Junction, VT, creating an atmosphere that makes it easy to meet people.

Linda Jarkesy, who went on the New Year's Getaway at the Coolidge, said she "had some trepidation about signing up for the trip because I didn't think I was going to know any of the people there. I was so amazed, delighted and encouraged to see how warm and open everyone

was! I met some wonderful people."

The weekend will also feature three worship and teaching sessions that will focus on the "spiritual disciplines" of Community, Solitude, and Service. Chris Gilbert, one of our directors of fellowship groups, will be speaking.

Registration, details and photos of past Getaways are at www.RedeemerChurchLife.com. Or you can call Tim Pettit, director of church life, at 808-4460 x 141.

REDEEMER REPORT

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The Redeemer Report is a publication of the Redeemer Presbyterian Church.
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HUNTER COLLEGE AUDITORIUM
EAST 69TH BETWEEN PARK AND LEXINGTON
services at 10:30 • 6:00

CHURCH OF ST. PAUL AND ST. ANDREW
86TH AND WEST END AVENUE
services at 7:00

Be a Volunteer!

Hope for New York makes a difference. Find out how you can get involved. Throughout February there will be multiple opportunities for you or your home group to find out how to get involved in mercy ministry in the city. Mark your calendar and visit our web site: www.hfny.org!

Orientations

Answers the questions:

What is Hope for New York?

And how can I find the right volunteer opportunity?

- Sunday 2/11 St Paul's and St. Andrew's after the worship service
- Sunday 2/18 Hunter College after each worship service

Please see our web site (www.hfny.org), the Redeemer web site (www.redeemer.com) and the bulletin for details of time and place.

Volunteer Fair

Meet volunteers and staff from over 30 different organizations that fulfill practical needs and offer the gospel.

Sunday 2/25 Hunter College after each service.

Please see our web site (www.hfny.org), the Redeemer web site (www.redeemer.com) and the bulletin for details of time and place.

Receive a free book –

Ministries of Mercy, The Call of the Jericho Road, by our very own Dr. Timothy J. Keller when you complete the electronic registration form. Register your skills, interests and availability on line to receive notification of new and existing opportunities that match you or your home fellowship group's profile.*

* All information will be confidential and will not be shared with any other organization or ministry.

Poverty and Social Policy

Ron Sider, well known author of *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* and *Just Generosity*, and expert on poverty and social policy in the United States will be speaking on Sunday, February 25, after the morning worship service at Hunter College. He will address the question "Why be involved?"—Reviewing the theology of mercy and justice ministry, historic events and trends as well as current opportunities and the pitfalls of involvement. Don't miss this face-to-face opportunity!

Other questions?

Please call the office for the Volunteer Manager, James Leonard 212-808-4460 x123 or Executive Director, Kate Lemmer x122. Email us at volunteer@hfny.org

YOUR CHOICE OF TWO PRE- MARITAL SEMINARS

You have a choice of two premarital seminars between now and the beginning of summer. The first will be on Saturday, April 7, followed by one on Saturday, June 9.

Both will run from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. at the church office, 15th floor, and cost \$35 per couple. To register, call the church receptionist at 808-4460 x110. The seminar is a prerequisite for having a Redeemer pastor officiate at your wedding. But it has also proved to be a great help to couples who are just beginning to discuss whether they want to get married.

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SHANTUNG COMPOUND

to shove.) However, as time passed and the quest to build a mini-civilization ran into one stumbling block after another, he began to rethink his conclusions.

This book not only took me to a time and place I'd never been, it forced my mind to think along new and unfamiliar lines (always an invigorating experience.) For those of you familiar with Eric Liddell of *Chariots of Fire* fame, Shantung compound was the place he was interned and where he died of a brain tumor shortly before release. (In the book he is called Eric Riddley and referred to as "a saint" for reasons I will leave you to discover. Gilkey felt the need to change the names of his compatriots, since not all of them could be described as saintly.)

If you enjoy the book—or hate it, for that matter—let me know what you think.

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only feels part of the elephant—each one has a part of divine truth.” But how can you know that unless you assume that you yourself are NOT blind and can “see the whole elephant.” Since you personally are already claiming superior knowledge to all other religions, why be hostile to Christianity on that account.

b) *Many people say, “We can only know things for sure if they can be scientifically proven. God (or Christ) can’t be proven, so I just can’t believe.”* But that belief—that only scientifically proven facts are certain, can’t itself be proven scientifically. Since you have already made a great leap of faith in order to hold your position, why not be open to belief in God?

c) *Many people say “No one can know truth for certain, so anyone who claims that there is an absolute truth is just making a power play.”* But if that is true, then your own claim about the nature of absolute truth is ITSELF a power play (since it is something you think “trumps other views.”) So, since you are already committed to absolute truth claims, why not be open to Christianity?

I DOUBT IT

d) *Many people say, “There can’t be a good God, because there is so much appalling evil and wickedness in the world.”* But if there is no God and we only evolved, then it takes quite a leap of faith to believe that there is a set of moral standards by which we know that the natural violence of nature is wrong. So since you have already believed in a super-natural moral truth, why not be open to belief in God?

Many people say, “There can’t be a good God, because there is so much appalling evil...

Doubt masquerades itself as skepticism, but it virtually never is. You can’t actually doubt one set of beliefs without a deep faith-commitment to some other set of beliefs. If you honestly admit what huge faith-leaps you are taking in order to doubt Christianity, it will make the faith-steps that Christianity requires appear much more do-able.

3. Comprehensively approach doubt with both the mind and the heart. As we said above, doubt is

a combination of thinking and feeling, just as faith is. Therefore, you must be careful not to try to attack doubt only with intellectual instruments. It won’t be enough to just argue and read and think and reason. You also need to pray and listen to Handel’s *Messiah* and spend time in Christian community. Some people may object: “but can’t do those things until I believe!”

But since doubts don’t insinuate themselves into your life strictly through the mind, but also through experience, they won’t leave that way alone, either. The doubting father was blessed by Jesus, but he asked Jesus, the one he doubted, to help him (Mark 9:24.) We need to do the same.

On the cross, Jesus experienced the absence of God. He was forsaken. He turned to God and felt nothing at all. He knows what it is like to find it impossible to sense God’s reality. Talk to the one you doubt, even if that seems awkward. Say to him, “Help my unbelief!” If on the other hand you are talking with a doubter, don’t be impatient, threatened, or smug. The Bible commands us to “be merciful to those who doubt (Jude 22.)