

Doubt and Belief

DISCUSSION

1. Imagine you open the refrigerator to get a glass of milk. You notice the “do not sell after _____” date has passed, and you wonder if the milk has gone bad. What do you do with the milk?

They could smell it, taste it, look at it, ask someone what they think by doing any of the same things.

Do they even bother to test it, or would they just toss it because “it’s not worth taking a chance”? Some people live and die by that printed date. Others really don’t think it matters. Others take it seriously, but want to check for themselves.

2. Based upon your answers above, what can you learn about yourself, how you go about beliefs?

LOOKING AT BELIEF AND TACTICS

I’ve taught you three questions to use when dialoguing about these topics.

1. What do you mean by that?
2. How did you come to that conclusion?
3. Have you ever considered... [question/information/idea]?

Actually, these questions are good not only for faith, apologetics, but for politics, sexuality, scientific theories, or *any topic*. That’s because these questions deal with *belief*. Take a look at these three questions again with the lens of how they relate to belief.

1. “What do you mean by that?” deals with clarifying your understanding of that belief.
2. “How did you come to that conclusion?” deals with the formation of that belief.
3. “Have you ever considered...?” deals with influencing that belief.

If I were to teach this course again, I would not entitle it “Apologetics” but something like “Belief, reasons, and doubt in Christianity.” I’ve been saying almost every week that the topics and questions we’re addressing aren’t really apologetics—defending the faith. They’re also for Christians and anyone trying to understand the faith.

In light of this, I'm going to end our course on a topic of belief and doubt. If I do this course again, I would probably start with this next time because it touches a nerve with 2 reasons why anyone would want to learn this stuff:

1. Learn this material to better talk with others about Christianity.
2. Learn this material to better understand ourselves why we believe.

I think some people come to this material for both of these reasons. But I think understanding for ourselves is the "better" reason—more primary, more basic. I also think that most people who want to learn this to help others understand soon realize they need to understand for themselves.

So here is our schedule for the rest of the course.

10	May 10	Science and Christianity, Part 1	
11	May 17	Science and Christianity, Part 2	
12	May 24	The Problem of Sin	
13	May 31	Assignment: Emailing a Friend	
14	Jun 7	Doubt and Belief	
15	Jun 14	Influences on Belief	
16	June 21	How to Grow as a Thinker, Reader, and Believer	
1	Jun 28	<i>New Class on Theology of Money</i>	
2	Jul 5	Money	

BELIEF AND DOUBT

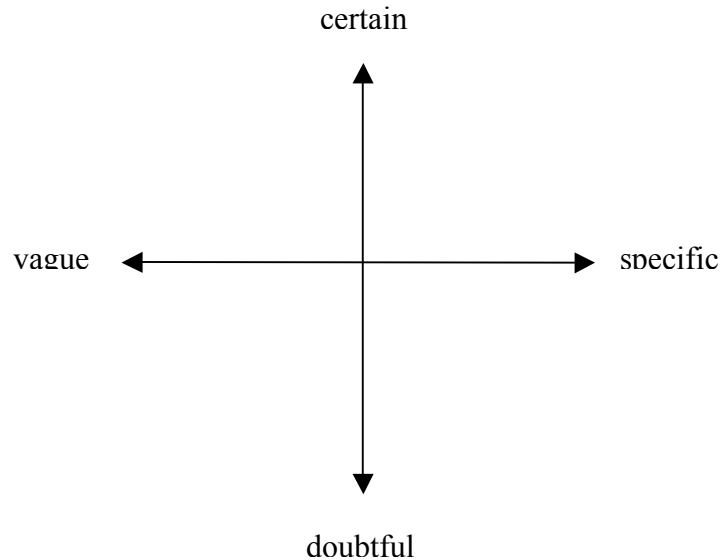
When people ask, "Do you believe X" (with X referring to any proposition), we often think the answer is a simple "Yes, I do believe," or "No, I don't." But in reality, there is a continuum of belief.

James Sire suggests a helpful way to look at belief along two axes: certainty and specificity. The vertical axis goes from doubtful to certain. And the horizontal axis goes from vague to specific.¹

You can plot your belief in any proposition on this graph. We'll look at belief in Christianity in general. You could plot where your belief is on this graph in terms of Christianity. You could plot where you *were* before, say prior to college. You could also plot where you think your belief in Christianity may be in the future. You could also plot where you think other people appear to be and compare what they actually wrote. We could have all sorts of interesting conversations with this simply graph!

Go ahead and plot your belief in Christianity today, in the past, and the future.

¹ James W. Sire, *Why Should Anyone Believe Anything at All?*, p.22-24. I have switched Sire's horizontal axis so that the left is vague and the right is specific. It seems to me helpful to use the typical Cartesian graph of increasing specificity from left to right (rather than increasing vagueness).



THE BIBLE'S TEACHING ON BELIEF AND DOUBT

Faith does not mean proof, nor does it mean blind hope:

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen... And without faith it is impossible to please [God], for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. (Hebrews 11:1-6ff, esp. 1, 6)

Temptation ultimately focuses you to doubt God:

Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil... Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, ... In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one... (Ephesians 6:10-18, esp. 16)

[The serpent] said to the woman, "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden,?' " (Gen 3:1ff.)

God plays a crucial role in forming our faith and beliefs:

"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast." (Ephesians 2:8-9)

The Lord Jesus helps our faith:

"[Lord,] I believe; help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:14-29, esp. 24)

Next week: What Influences Our Beliefs