

After Doubt: How to Question Your Faith without Losing It by A.J. Swoboda

A Book Review by Matt Mezak

“An inch is everything when you are balancing” GK Chesterton

The words that kept coming into my mind when reading A.J. Swoboda’s *After Doubt: How to Question Your Faith without Losing It*.

Swoboda has written a phenomenal - dare I even say a must read - book on the topic of doubt and deconstruction for followers of Jesus.

Deconstruction and doubt are all around us. My social media feeds, email devotionals, articles sent to me from friends all on this topic have flooded my screens and in doing so, have flooded my brain.

Typically, this goes one of two ways. Demonize, or Celebrate.

These are typically the responses I see when someone who loves Jesus brings up “no-no” topics of the faith. Why does God seem to be absent in times of distress? When an earthquake kills hundreds of thousands in Turkey, where was God? How do we handle the never ending list of pastors or christian leaders who have done incredible damage in the name of God? (even as I write these words, a new name will be added to the list). How do we handle difficult parts of the Holy Scriptures where something extends beyond our neat categories?

Demonize:

“If you really loved God you wouldn’t question him”

“You just need to have more faith”

“Well when we get to Heaven we’ll figure it out”

Celebrate:

“Yes, you’re finally evolving from your naive, childhood faith!”

“I haven’t stepped foot in a church in years, don’t look back at all, you won’t miss it.”

“#Exvangelical”

But what if neither of these are the response that our questions need, or deserve?

A Different, A Better Way

“To struggle with one’s faith is often the surest sign we actually have one.”

In *After Doubt*, Swaboda argues for a third way, a different, way, a better way. A way that neither demonizes nor celebrates our doubt and deconstruction, but to reframe doubt as a way of calling us all deeper into life with Christ. Doubt, rather than driving us away from God, ought to be dealt with and realized as a vehicle to potentially drive us even closer to God, as we see the beauty of Jesus in the middle of our questions.

He writes:

“Is there a way to walk through this deconstruction with Jesus into deeper faith? Is it possible to come out on the other side more in love with the living God? Is there a way to navigate deconstruction and have a deeper love for the church afterward? Can deconstruction make us more compassionate and gracious toward others with whom we disagree? Can it forge in us the character of God?”

In other words, can we navigate seasons and times of doubt, whether these doubts are primarily theological, a result of personal trauma, or a result of church hurt, and come out the other side of doubt a more devoted follower of Jesus?

The first part of Swoboda’s book is descriptive. Terms are defined, studies are consulted, and a background of our modern understandings of faith and doubt are closely looked at.

The second half of Swoboda’s book is prescriptive. A way forward is actually presented. Without giving too much away, Swoboda discusses things like: Wrestling with faith in community, with real people rather than with people on a screen, feeling and knowing our entire self, practicing being wrong at times, how to embrace a God who is bigger than our categories, and how to trust God in the moments that require trust.

Two things were particularly helpful in the second half, the prescriptive part of the book:

1. Do not go through doubt in silence. “Sometimes the best I can do when I struggle with my faith—is surround myself with the faithful the way the blind would for those who see. We all need a group around us who believe for us when we struggle to believe on our own.” The responsibility of a church community is to provide space for us to be vulnerable and honest with our questions, recognizing that we all have questions. The way Scripture puts it is to: “Have mercy on those who doubt.” Jude 22. When we depend on the real person walking alongside of us, more than we rely on the YouTube rabbit trail or trendy podcast, we’ll be in a good spot to move through doubt.
2. There are unhealthy and simply wrong aspects of our growing in the faith that need to be deconstructed, and doubting and calling those things out, is not the same as doubting God as revealed to us in Christ. **In other words, noticing and calling out the abuse of church leaders and pastors as evil, is a good and required kind of deconstruction.** Turning a blind eye to the ways that the church has failed does not make us better Christians, in fact it actually makes us responsible in the evil that has been done in the name of Jesus. Swoboda does an incredible job in showing that doubting Jesus, and having issues with the ways that modern Christianity has failed, are not the same thing. In fact, to be faithful to Jesus often requires the naming, and repenting of the ways that we have failed Jesus.

If you are prone to doubt, if you are a young person who follows Jesus, if you have a son or daughter, grandson or granddaughter who’s grown up in the church, *After Doubt: How to Question Your Faith without Losing It* is a book for you.