



The Thomas Factor - Chapter 2: Common Myths

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The Thomas Factor: Using Your Doubts to Draw Closer to God

This is Chapter 2 of The Thomas Factor: Using Your Doubts to Draw Closer to God. Gary Habermas wrote the book for 'Christians who doubt' or are just a little unsure about their faith. Subsequent chapters will be placed online in due course, and all sections of the book will be linked together.

The full Table of Contents links to each chapter, along with a brief description.

Chapter 2 - Common Myths

Have you ever been sick and purchased the medicine that you thought you needed, only to discover that you did not get any better? Perhaps after a trip to your physician, you got different medicine, and began to feel well. The key was obviously getting the proper diagnosis and treatment. If either is incorrect, one may never get rid of the symptoms.

So it is with doubt, too. Getting the correct diagnosis and remedy are crucial to overcoming the problem and finding relief. While we will deal more directly with these two topics in coming chapters, we will begin by noting many of the common myths concerning religious uncertainty. As in our story above, beginning with the correct information gives one a much more likely chance to cure the hurt.

Few topics are subject to more misconceptions than that of doubt. Since starting with truth is critical, we want to continue laying a foundation on which to build as we move along. Here are a few examples of how misbeliefs about religious uncertainty create problems:

Dave reasoned that since doubt was the opposite of faith, his continued questions must mean that he had committed the unpardonable sin. While he longed more than anything for forgiveness and fellowship with God, he believed he had forfeited both by his objections, which he thought of as cancelling his faith. This conclusion caused him incredible amounts of emotional torment, including thinking that he would never be able to find what he wanted most of all in life: lasting assurance and peace.

Alicia thought that biblical characters never doubted because God was in constant and regular contact with them, unlike today. But she also knew that she and many of her believing friends did have questions about Christianity, including the feeling that the Creator had been silent towards them. Her incorrect beliefs led her to draw faulty conclusions about the nature of God. These, in turn, were detrimental to her spiritual growth.

John was an unbeliever who thought that doubts generally occurred only to conservative Christians, as a direct result of their strict social standards. It seemed that all he ever heard from them was, "Do this ... Don't do that." This largely accounted for his choice to avoid orthodox Christianity in all of its forms, including those persons who believed it, for fear that he might also become "contaminated."

Each of these individuals was suffering in one way or another due to believing and acting upon false information. You may recall my own testimony. I can understand these sorts of mistakes because I was also badly misinformed, even though I would have professed a long-standing interest in the topic. Let's investigate some of these misbeliefs that one frequently hears about the subject of religious uncertainty. Some of our assertions will make use of the Scripture passages that we viewed in the last chapter.

Misbeliefs about Doubt

"Doubt never occurs to heroes in the Bible."

We devoted the last chapter to show that there are plenty of reasons to reject this contention. But because it is commonly thought to be true, we mention it again. Job, Abraham, David, other writers of the inspired Psalms, Jeremiah, John the Baptist, and the apostle Paul are all witnesses against this charge. Although all these men were biblical superheroes, they were also human beings and sinners. They followed God, but they struggled at times, too. This is one reason why they can be such examples for us, even today. It would seem that anyone who takes the Bible at face value would have to agree.

We also saw that these biblical champions grappled with matters like the presence of evil in the world and the silence of God. Contrary to Alicia's belief in the story above, they were not in unbroken communication with God. They had many of the same questions as we do in our generation. Alicia needs to correct her false impressions so that she does not compromise her view of God's nature and stunt her spiritual growth.

"Doubt only affects Christians, but never atheists or other unbelievers."

We have also addressed this assertion in some detail and found it to be incorrect. Some unbelievers in Scripture were open to God, while others hardened their hearts against him. Some didn't believe even after they saw Jesus' miracles. Hence, Jesus responded differently to each of them.

Not only do we have the witness of Scripture that non-Christians can live in a state of doubt, but contemporary writers like C.S. Lewis have given their own testimonies to this fact, as well. The biblical heroes we just mentioned even have something in common with these unbelievers: they are all human beings, existing in a fallen, sinful state. This is the root cause for the problem we have been discussing and the chief reason why doubt is not a respecter of persons. One related charge is that only conservative Christians are regular doubters, like John's complaint in our story above. Granted, the excessive following of rules can, without question, contribute to uncertainty at any of several levels. But we have

already seen that far more than conservatives are involved; people from all walks of life question their religious beliefs. So John's complaint was itself too selective in not recognizing the pervasiveness of doubt. He had rejected orthodox Christianity for illegitimate reasons.

"Doubt is relatively rare."

Admittedly, just because both believers and unbelievers experience religious uncertainty, this does not mean that it is common. Neither does the Bible appear to answer this question, except by implication. Even so, since this phenomenon is so common throughout Scripture, involving so many persons, the thought that it is at least fairly frequent would seem to follow. One might offer two further biblical points, too: that so many of those who experienced doubt were spiritual giants only adds to the contention that it probably happens to many who are not so spiritually attuned. Further, since everyone shares a common human, sinful thread, we might even expect that this experience would be a regular occurrence. To these biblical considerations, we can add countless testimonies from people today – believers and unbelievers alike. I have already said that dozens of my own interviews have led me to suspect that it is exceptionally common. At least to me, it is obvious enough that I suspect it to be a very common experience. Of course, I don't claim scientific data for this conclusion.

"Doubt is the opposite of faith; it is actually unbelief."

This is another protest that we have already addressed. While doubt can tend in the direction of unbelief, and while it is expressed by unbelievers, this is certainly not the case with the majority of examples in the Bible. Most of the time, it is believers themselves who ask the questions and pose the problems. (Of course, Scripture chiefly addresses believers, so we cannot use this to say that more Christians than non-Christians doubt.) In our definition, we saw that doubt more frequently contains the idea of being caught in between two positions. There is a Greek noun for belief (*pistis*) and another one for unbelief (*apistia*). Doubt is neither: it more commonly expresses ideas such as perplexity, worry, uncertainty, or perhaps weak faith.

To see if doubt is really unbelief, recalling a few of the instances that we have already looked at

might be helpful. In the Old Testament, Job was not only a righteous servant of God when Satan began to tempt him, but he was vindicated in the end, too. Never was he addressed by God as an unbeliever. This was even more the case with Abraham, the man of faith. To call his questions the result of his unbelief is simply to miss the point of his entire story. While David sinned, he was also one of the chief examples of a man of God. Sure, he struggled with his faith on occasion, but he was unquestionably a believer.

In the New Testament, we dare not say that John the Baptist's doubt was unbelief, or we would be close to contradicting our Lord's assertion that he was the most righteous man ever born of a woman. Neither could it be properly claimed that Paul's unanswered prayers were unbelief. And what about Jesus' emotional struggles in the Garden of Gethsemane? It seems that we would have to do some fast talking here!

Therefore we conclude that doubt can be negative and does, on occasion, incline towards unbelief. However, its normal biblical use is to describe believers who struggle with various aspects of their faith. We even have cases where strong charges are made against God, but where the individual is definitely a believer.

"Doubt always indicates that something serious is wrong; perhaps it is even the unpardonable sin."

This is the first of several charges that, while not totally wrong, are half-truths. But since part of the notion is correct, sometimes half-truths are more hurtful than total misbeliefs.

So we might begin here by noting a certain amount of general agreement with the assertion. Yes, the presence of ongoing doubt that is more than a passing mood or momentary pressure may well be a signal that something is wrong. That is why this book is being written. It doesn't follow, however, that this "wrongness" is something that is seriously, or necessarily, spiritual, although it may certainly be so. It could also signal the presence of medical or emotional factors that need to be dealt with. But while emotional doubt, in particular, can be very painful, it doesn't always follow that the level of hurt indicates that something is terribly wrong. This frequent incommensurability between pain and

seriousness is one of the many false alarms about doubt.

In contrast, the portion about the unpardonable sin would appear to be quite mistaken. Commentators usually agree that this condition is an ongoing state of mind, not the result of a momentary lapse. It generally proceeds from a settled attitude that rejects (and continues to reject) God, not from a brief, angry outburst(s). This is not to overlook the latter, because it can be serious, too, but only to say that it doesn't seem to qualify as an unforgivable condition. Most scholars say that Dave's attitude in the illustration above shows that he certainly didn't commit the unpardonable sin. His desire for repentance and his longing for God, along with the fact that questions about God do not automatically cause one to enact this dreaded sin, are the best indications of this.

Further, if normal doubts qualify one for the unforgivable sin, then why was it not committed by the writer in Psalm 44? Don't many of the other Psalms that challenge God end in thanksgiving and praise, without any indication that the authors are now unbelievers? Wouldn't Job's thirty chapters of constant and even excessive challenges against God show that he was in an unforgivable state? But God allows his repentance at the end of the book! How many strikes does Abraham get before he would have been called out? Could he ever be known as the man of faith and figure so prominently in Hebrews 11 if this objection were true? When David committed the double sin of murder and adultery with Bathsheba, causing his questions of assurance, why could he later repent, recover, and become a man after God's heart? What about John the Baptist's seeming readiness to turn to another "messiah"? If he had crossed the line to the unpardonable sin, could Jesus have paid him the tremendous compliment that he did?

It would seem that the biblical material, over and over again, causes us to reject the second part of this charge against religious uncertainty. To be sure, the unpardonable sin is real and to be avoided at all costs. But raising questions such as those we have been considering do not appear to qualify.

"Doubt shouldn't be admitted or discussed

since it is basically a character flaw."

In a sense, religious uncertainty does come from a character flaw – we have been calling it sin! But it doesn't follow that it is therefore something that should be shut up and kept away from others, like a rabid dog, or some highly contagious disease! Here we have another half-truth. True, questioning one's faith can and has spread to others. But so does finding biblical, godly solutions. In fact, this is precisely one of the reasons why it should be both admitted and discussed. This is a subject where public examination can be one of the surest ways to find relief and healing.

There is another sense in which doubt is a character trait. It most frequently follows personality types, as we will see later, making it important that we recognize our personal tendencies and understand ahead of time where they might very well end up. Frequently, all we may need to say to ourselves during a period of religious vacillation is: "That's just me again! Calm down." Recognizing and reading our dispositions is an indispensable part of handling doubt. But this is a topic that comes later.

"Doubt is usually factual in nature; it is always satisfied by studying the evidence."

I said earlier that this was my initial thought back in my early days of doubting. Actually this conviction lasted through years of study. But I found myself wondering on many occasions why a careful marshalling of the facts, even in cases where this basis was almost overwhelmingly strong, did not always calm the uncertainty. This was especially so when the questioning took on emotional or volitional dimensions. In fact, I am understating the problem here. It was immensely frustrating to find that the doubt barely budged during passionate moments.

This led to additional struggles. Why weren't the facts working? Could this also be a problem? Had I not studied something correctly? Here I was faced with a secondary level of uncertainty. Sometimes I just wanted to walk away from the subject altogether, but I knew that wouldn't solve my quandary.

After years more of study I concluded that although there were often factual components involved, and answers ultimately returned to the

issue of whether Christianity had a solid foundation, few doubts were solved by straightforward citations of the relevant facts. This often seemed to help in the short run, sometimes substantially, but it generally lasted for only a few days. Here I am reminded of the words spoken to me years ago by a colleague: "Faith is weak when it fluctuates according to the latest archaeological discovery." I had to admit: a faith that seems to need almost daily bolstering by the facts was also in need of something else to deal with the underlying issue, something more permanent.

So the facts by themselves fail to satisfy the emotional and volitional elements of doubt. One major reason for this conclusion is that humans are whole entities – we are more than data alone. As whole persons, we need to satisfy the other components of our being, as well. Doubt is rarely a problem in the realm of facts alone. So the solution, not surprisingly, spills beyond that narrow range.

"Doubt chiefly occurs to those who are intellectually gifted."

It may be the case that many doubters are highly intelligent people, but that is beside the point of how it is healed. Strangely enough, this makes it more dangerous for some doubters who are used to attacking problems head-on, with a good dose of "smarts". It figures that they will once again turn to what has always worked for them, but religious uncertainty usually arises for less than intellectual reasons. Unless the person goes beyond this approach for their answer, it will most likely remain impervious to correction, since they will not look for an emotional basis to their problem. When you don't think your emotions are a problem, it is not shocking if you don't look there for your answers.

Once again, digging out Christianity's strong foundation is quite valuable, since it is needed at so many junctures. But we must work forward from there to other areas in order to solve many of the most common problems of uncertainty. Dealing with the issues will push one quickly enough beyond the point of the facts alone. I have tested this principle probably hundreds of times, which accounts for my practical assurance that it really works.

But we cannot overemphasize the point about the

intellectual capacities of doubters, since many of them are not overly intellectual. This could even be a help, since they are more likely to admit that they frequently struggle with their emotions. Thus they are closer to some solutions.

"Doubt generally follows similar patterns."

If this misconception sees religious doubt as a fairly one-dimensional or single-faceted phenomenon, proceeding along uniform lines, then few things about the subject are more mistaken. Uncertainty is as varied as are the people who experience it. And as we have said, it comes through at least three major avenues: factual, emotional, and volitional. So it certainly differs from person to person.

Having said this, however, it is also true that, once one properly identifies the species of doubt, it may follow a generally similar sequence. Of course there are personal twists and turns as varied as the personal experiences of those who venture down these paths. But the adviser who understands well the various facets and how they develop in each of their chief variations can often predict the trail it is taking in the individual.

Once I determine where the person stands, I generally use the route of predicting what he or she is saying to themselves, how they feel, and so on. Usually, the person wonders, "how I do know all this?" (If they only knew the years of painful steps that led me to this point!) I think such a process often instils confidence in the doubter, because it tells them that you understand their dilemma. It also lets them know that others have travelled this way before them. It is almost always a comfort to know that you are not a loner when you work through a problem area. If the prediction was inaccurate, I simply back up to the previous point, listen some more, and then try again.

"Doubt can generally be solved by the same remedy or response."

This is another half-truth, so it can have a good point to make. If it means that there is one step that all must apply, after which they will get relief, then I am very sceptical. For example, if it is suggested that all a person needs to do is to confess their sins, or pray, or get more spiritual, I am willing to listen. But this sounds a bit like Job's friends, who thought that they were giving good, spiritual advice, too, but God was not pleased

with what they said (Job 42:7–10). To be sure, the recommendation could well work, depending on the particulars, but I think Scripture also varies its advice for different maladies, and with good reason.

If the point of the assertion is that, once a workable solution is found, it can often be applied across the board, then this is potentially very positive. Once again, it depends on the particulars, but in principle it is possible. Sometimes more than one solution is very helpful. Different and even unconventional patterns work for various people. This is why we will provide a variety of suggestions. By analogy, physicians frequently prescribe two or more medicines for the same sickness, including varying the type or doses for different cases.

"Doubt never produces positive results."

We have already said many times that religious scepticism can do harm, and the word itself can lean in the direction of unbelief or despair. But just because negative results can result, doesn't mean they will. And it certainly doesn't mean that blessings cannot result. We will even take a chapter to outline some of the positive results that can and have followed from the dark nights of doubt.

We need to keep in mind that believers are not asking permission in order to indulge in a pastime here. They seemingly don't want to question their faith. They desire fellowship with God. So, given that doubt is a reality in their lives, its resulting in their growth and development is beneficial.

"Doubt always gets worse as one grows older, especially as one gets closer to death."

This would seem to be a very fruitful area of research that might yield some fascinating results. Perhaps contrary to popular conceptions, however, this assertion at least appears on the surface not to be the case. According to at least one massive survey (*Faith Development and Your Ministry*, The Gallup Poll, 1986) along with some other publications, older adults paradoxically seem to be more settled in their beliefs and thus experience less doubt.

There may be some good reasons why this is the case. Perhaps foremost on the list, developmental theory indicates that the elderly could well have

moved past the formative stages of growth and come to rest in a settled sense of who they are, what life is about, and what they believe. Other considerations include the likelihood that they no longer have the immediate worries of providing for their children, there is less responsibility in general, and some have already experienced the death of their mate. Reasons like these could well ease the tension of questions that were more frequent earlier in life.

Once I had the privilege of interviewing an elderly Christian couple in their eighties who had always seemed to express a quiet, mature faith. I inquired concerning their beliefs, their worries, and their fear of death. I asked very frank questions, pushing for “behind the scenes” sorts of answers. They impressed me ever so much with this settled quality of life that I just mentioned. They appeared to be firm in their faith and not to be afraid to die. In fact, they rather strongly and confidently affirmed both. Further, they indicated that, while they had been worriers earlier in life, their present state had lasted for about the past twenty years or so. True, this is only one couple. But all I can say is that I was exceptionally impressed with their forthright answers.

Conclusion

The falsehoods presented in this chapter were chosen because they are frequent Christian reactions to the subject of doubt. Singling them out and correcting them is crucial, but too seldom done. It is precisely because of such misbeliefs that many find their own conditions so difficult to unravel. After all, if we cannot identify and locate physical problems, we won't know what to treat.

This leads us to one of the most important principles of this book. To misidentify the specific nature of doubt is frequently to look in the wrong direction for the cure. We need something specific at which to take careful aim. But if I cannot determine the nature of the problem, it is certainly questionable if I will discover the surest route to healing, except by accident. Knowing the specific nature of the doubt allows me to see it in its clearest light and attack it from the best angle.

Just to know, for instance, that religious doubt plagues virtually everyone at some time is comforting in itself. Realizing that it is a common

human condition is heartening; it at least reveals that I am not alone in my dilemma.

Further, to realize that the devastating affects of uncertainty can usually be cured and that the entire experience can even lead to very positive results can be equally liberating. All of this means that we need to learn more about the nature of doubt. This will be one of our upcoming goals.

We also need to be able to recognize the specific species of doubt and its general characteristics. All doubt is not created equal. It may follow various patterns and require more than one strategy before healing will take place. We have said that there are at least three distinct types (or species) of doubt. To understand the differences between each is to begin to zero in on some specific strategies with which to combat them.

Now read Chapter 3 of the book: "Two Species of Doubt".