



## The Thomas Factor - Chapter 3: Two Species of Doubt

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

*This is Chapter 3 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.*

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### Chapter 3 - Two Species of Doubt

Secrets come in all shapes and sizes. Sometimes they are nice, and sometimes they are not. Once in a while, what they seem to be is not what they, in fact, are. But sometimes they are something special – they lead to valuable discoveries. Like keys, they unlock doors to hidden treasures.

One of the best-kept secrets about religious doubt is that it comes in several forms. We have said that these variations can generally be characterized into three major species: factual, emotional, and volitional. It is crucial to understand the difference between these varieties of uncertainty. To be aware of the general characteristics and some of the root causes of each type is to get a good start in formulating a strategy for confronting it.

In this chapter, we will address the first and third types. Chapter 5 will begin our in-depth study of type two, which is the specific focus of this book.

After definitions of factual and volitional doubt, we will explore a few of the underlying situations that seem to give rise to each.

### Identifying Factual Doubt

Factual doubt is chiefly concerned with the foundations of religious belief and whether they are well-grounded. Are there reasons for faith? Evidence for Christianity can come from many areas, for example: biblical, logical, metaphysical, historical, scientific, or even moral. The central issue concerns the warrant for religious claims, as well as giving answers to others who pose various objections.

Confronting factual doubt, then, might involve bolstering a belief by providing reasons for it. Of course, having a number of strong evidences is preferable. But strangely enough, not all reasons to believe involve producing the cold, hard facts in a scientific laboratory or in a courtroom. Sometimes reasons come from seemingly unconventional arguments or sources, like the knowledge that all humans share, or the deepest longings of one's heart. Other times, counter-strikes are necessary against potential challenges to faith. This is the area of defending the Christian faith, or apologetics.

Factual doubt, then, might come in the form of questions about the truthfulness of the Christian faith. It could pertain to biblical topics (like concerns about conflicting teachings), logical items (such as issues involving the nature of God), or other areas of philosophy (including the existence of God or the problem of evil). Still more questions could come from historical areas (like verifying the resurrection of Jesus), or scientific enterprises (such as evidence for design in the universe or the origin of life).

One earmark of factual doubt is that, if this is the sole or primary component, it should be satisfied by the various data. This assumes that such evidences and explanations are available and that they are accessible to the individual. During and after many years of doubting, I've spent my entire professional life pursuing such avenues. I can testify that there is simply a staggering amount of confirmation of theism in general and Christianity in particular. But having received sufficient information, including possible follow-up issues,

the doubter should then be satisfied.

Of course, apologetics shouldn't be left just to the professionals. The apostle Peter commands all believers to always be ready to give an answer or defense (Greek, *apologia*) for their hope to anyone who asks (1 Pet. 3:15). This assumes that we have such answers at our disposal and that we know how to communicate them.

Karen was shocked by her college roommate's forceful challenge that all religious belief was simply a psychological crutch. "I have plenty of personal reasons for being a Christian," Karen responded.

"Personal reasons are not enough," her friend replied. "Unless you can point to things in the world that can be verified by science, your belief is no more than wish fulfillment."

What could she say? Since childhood, Karen had always been taught that all one could do was believe – no factual reasons were possible. She began a study of Christian evidences.

In the meantime, she spoke to a Christian friend who was a philosophy major. She learned that the demand for scientific corroboration was itself not scientifically grounded. In other words, the requirement that one produce scientific evidence is itself not scientific – so it fails its own test. Here the shoe was on the other foot. Why should Karen submit to the charge to produce scientific data when her friend could give no such reason for requiring that particular demand? On what grounds should this challenge itself be feared when it had flunked its own test?

Days later, her friend admitted rather sheepishly that she had no scientific reasons to require science as a test for truth. It had cost some time and energy, but Karen had learned that the challenge had been an empty one. Although she didn't react like she had won a battle, Karen was greatly relieved. She may not have realized it at the time, but she was also learning another two important lessons: not all challenges that refer to the facts are themselves factual. Further, one's faith might grow stronger if one is willing to take the time to answer questions.

What seems to be a factual question, then, is

sometimes argued on faulty grounds. Granted, many issues cannot be dismissed so easily. Honestly assessing challenges and providing real answers is the domain of apologetics. We will return to the topic of factual support of faith in chapter 6, although we will not be able to provide the actual evidence in this book. While facts don't always cure doubt, they are a necessary starting point – a foundation on which to build.

### **Aggravations to Factual Doubt**

Several conditions may intensify factual doubt. There is not a strict causal relation between these situations and the uncertainty, however, since we have the ability to short-circuit the process and not allow the doubt to gain a foothold. We will have more to say about this later.

Still, we will list a few problem areas that can contribute to a distressed state of mind. While there may be some overlap between the categories, each has its own distinctions. It is hoped that understanding some of the root aggravations may help us to grasp better the nature of the doubt. This is a subject where knowledge is potentially the beginning of the victory.

1. *Factual questions*: Being asked challenging objections to one's faith is often the fastest way to experience factual doubts. The latter is probably more difficult because of the assumed confrontation of the moment. One often feels that it is "Put-up-or-shut-up" time! After all, if we cannot be sure of the underpinnings of Christianity, what's left? If a lack of knowledge keeps one from answering critical accusations, whatever the source, factual uncertainty is a distinct possibility.

2. *Questioning intellect*: A source of many worries comes from those who enjoy asking questions and doing their own research. While it may be a hobby that the person really enjoys, this may backfire for any of a number of reasons: we may get too busy and have less time to spend with the problems, or come up against someone who challenges them more than normal. Sometimes a mind that works like this outgrows the interest in perpetual curiosity, but the questions remain. Thus, this sort of person may gain both strengths and challenges from their intellectual pursuit.

3. *Sidetracked by pseudo problems*: This is another very common variety of factual doubt. But unlike the first two, this one occurs when a believer is confronted by seeming problems that are not central to the truthfulness of Christianity. In fact, these issues don't make any substantial difference no matter which view is correct! In other words, whoever is right or wrong, Christianity need not change a single iota! I have in mind questions pertaining to subjects like the age of the earth, the sign gifts, eternal security, various issues in eschatology, or differing convictions concerning separation from the world. True, these are all important and the Bible does say something about them. But the possible positions generally have nothing to say about the overall facticity of Christianity. Yet, it might be argued that these topics get the most heated attention among believers. The combatants will frequently argue that unless their position is true, Christianity suffers in some grotesque fashion!

But this is not to say that this sort of question only surfaces among believers. Unbelievers also challenge Christians with seeming problems that don't threaten the classic truths of orthodox Christianity. Yet, as if no one noticed this, believers respond as if their spiritual lives depended on the outcome.

So why do we experience this consternation? I think the chief reason for the doubt, in addition to factors like pride and ignorance, is that believers far too seldom distinguish between absolutely crucial and non-crucial issues. It is often thought that everything Christians believe (whether theological, ethical, social, or political) is of equal importance. But since it is obvious to all that there are different expressions of orthodox Christianity (is your church Calvinistic?), these sorts of problems are bound to arise. In short, given the differences, believing that everything in Christianity is of equal weight will lead some to doubt.

Ben had been raised in the same church all of his life, as well as attending its Christian school. After marriage, he moved across the country and began attending a different church. It was not long before he noticed some differences. In particular, his new pastor seemed to be far more open on issues of separation than Ben's previous pastor had forbidden to true Christians. Being a layman

and having relied all of his life on his pastor's opinions, Ben wondered if a complaint that he had sometimes heard was really true after all: "The Bible totally depends on how it is interpreted. There are no objective teachings in it." Over the months, he began to struggle concerning which of his former beliefs could be trusted and which ones could not.

4. *World view commitments*: Some doubts are related to struggles over issues that are only as sound as the world view in which the position is held. In other words, some rival ideas are inadequate by themselves, but can only meaningfully exist as part of a larger ideology. The Christian may reject the non-Christian system but not realize that there is no problem apart from that world view. The doubt may come from attempting to answer the challenge in a vacuum.

For example, earlier we saw that Karen was initially challenged by the contention that all religious experiences were psychological crutches. But if her friend's own world view is mistaken, and especially if some reasons could be cited against the positions that make such charges, then the point about all personal religious experience being only subjective would seem to be questionable itself. Then whose position was really wish fulfillment? It all depended on who is correct in their total outlook.

In fact, as a well-known atheist once said to me, the knife cuts both ways here – it could be the unbeliever who has a psychological crutch because they do not wish to believe. This sort of critique gets us nowhere unless we anchor it to a system.

Knowing where the enemy is coming from is half the battle. If believers know what sorts of conditions are likely to lead to factual doubt, it would make sense that they would be more able to prepare for them.

### **Identifying Volitional Doubt**

Volitional religious doubt is chiefly concerned with one's will. It is perhaps most frequently revealed in matters such as whether an individual is willing to believe, to grow in faith, to forsake sin, or be motivated to live the Christian life. Many times it concerns the "fire" we have to continue our ultimate

commitment to the Lord.

At each of these points, the issue of decision making should be apparent. Volitional uncertainty, at its very heart, has to do with one's willingness to implement a choice regarding one's faith.

Ironically enough, the problem might even be the unwillingness to apply certain healing techniques to the problem. In this sense, volitional aspects are present in all types of uncertainty.

Years ago Jason had several factual questions about the truthfulness of Christianity. When no one answered these to his satisfaction, it began to affect him emotionally: "What if the Bible isn't true, after all?" Following a number of unsolved bouts with his emotions, he slowly concluded that his beliefs just were not as important to him as they once had been. He was no longer motivated concerning his previous religious commitment.

Unfortunately, doubt sometimes appears to follow just such a pattern. It can progress from fairly simple (but unanswered) factual questions, through emotional quandaries, to a "deadened" level where the entire issue no longer appears crucial to the individual. Believers can get here through other kinds of hurts, too, like losing a loved one or being rebuffed by someone who matters to them. But when the results affect one's will in regards to one's faith, it becomes a volitional issue.

This stage is probably the most serious time of all for the person who questions, since they just may not care that they are struggling and, therefore, may not wish to do anything to stop it, including talking about the subject. The reverse of emotional doubt, this species may hurt the least, but be the most dangerous.

The key to volitional matters is to gain a new angle on our life – to view it from God's perspective. These doubters need to get "fired up" about those things that are of prime importance to us (Matt. 6:21). Jesus said that we need to get excited most of all about God and his Kingdom (Matt. 6:19–33). After all, eternal life lasts longer and is of far better quality than our earthly existence. Further, directing our minds towards eternity improves the quality of life here on earth, as well. Jesus' message should excite the

believer, since it affects both our present, as well as our future. But this is also another matter. (Chapter 12 includes some suggested readings.)

Understanding volitional doubt helps us not only on its own grounds, but it provides insights into the other species, too. All doubt has a wilful aspect. Now we will look at some conditions that tend to irritate our resolve.

### **Aggravations to Volitional Doubt**

As we did with factual doubt, we will state several circumstances that may contribute to and intensify volitional doubt. Again, one doesn't cause the other, but these problems can contribute to the distressed condition.

*1. Weak Faith:* Frequently a doubting believer has the sense of wishing they could increase their faith, but concludes that it is too difficult to believe any further. In James' terms, they see themselves as wavering between two positions (James 1:6–8). During my own struggles I well remember thinking that this was a chief issue for me: how could I help my faith to grow?

*2. Immature faith:* Sometimes faith suffers from a lack of development, perhaps from factors stemming from the time when a person first committed her life to Christ, or from wrong ideas afterwards. Perhaps the individual was very young at the time of conversion and simply doesn't remember exactly what happened. Did I do the right thing? Was I pressured in making my decision? Was I totally committed to Christ?

While there could be emotional or other factors present, the chief issue here is one of the will: did the person truly commit herself to Christ? Whether immaturity was present is not of prime importance. We are discussing the surrender of the will.

At this point someone will blurt out: "But that's precisely my problem. I'm not sure whether or not I trusted Christ." In cases of real uncertainty as to whether a person trusted Christ, I usually encourage them to pray and express their trust in the Lord once again. They can pray the same "sinner's prayer," reciting the facts of the gospel, and tell the Lord, "If I'm already a Christian, then this is simply a prayer of further commitment. But

if not, I'm trusting you right now." This usually solves the problem of being unsure. Some may disagree with this practice, but I personally find nothing here that disagrees with Scripture.

**3. Lack of growth:** Doubt can result from the believer's failure to grow in the Christian life. Some even seem to shun the idea of getting serious with the Lord, as if getting too close to him will somehow hurt, as in being sent to Africa as a missionary. Whatever the reason, not growing is a decision that can lead to uncertainty. Adding to this dilemma is that maturing in faith, in itself, is one of the chief means to stem the tide of doubt. As in human relationships, a lack of growth can lead to drifting apart. Conversely, growing commitment is itself a doubt preventative.

**4. Self-sufficiency:** Arrogance towards God creates its own brand of uncertainty. But it should be plain that this sort of rebellion that places self above God is not the biblical breeding ground for a meaningful relationship with the heavenly Father. Unless the situation is corrected by repentance and God's grace, it would seem that this sort of situation, humanly speaking, will only get worse.

**5. Lack of repentance:** Unforgiven sin certainly contributes to a sense of separation from God, thereby encouraging doubts. The decision not to repent can be made either implicitly or explicitly, but just as this sort of situation affects the relationship between a husband and wife, it also militates against having peace.

Emily, a young woman with an outstanding Christian testimony, began experiencing some rather severe doubts after deciding that her marriage relationship was too binding. She spoke to a close Christian friend who wouldn't agree with her evaluation. Sadly, as long as Emily remained in her rebellious state, the doubts also remained. Yet she refused to repent.

An older Christian man, Frank, was obviously depressed and hardly wanted to discuss his questions of assurance with his pastor. During their counseling, Frank admitted his years of indulging in sin and admitted that this was very possibly the reason for his lack of certainty. But he was unwilling to change. Neither did his uncertainty diminish.

**6. Difficulty of application:** I have saved for last one of the most common (and inexplicable) causes why volitional doubters don't get relief. Shockingly, there is often a reluctance to apply the biblical steps for healing, even when they are known. Since it is sometimes difficult to concentrate on the application during the doubt, some conclude that it is easier to apply the steps only sporadically, or not at all. Just like pulling weeds is not fun, sometimes it is also difficult to deal with these problems in one's life. But one of the most frequent comments I've ever heard is that, when biblical steps are applied, the doubt diminishes or disappears. Conversely, when these steps are not taken, the uncertainty returns.

This sounds similar to something we frequently hear people say: "When I take my medicine, I feel better. When I don't, I fail to get relief." Do you ever wonder what you're missing when you hear these things?

## Conclusion

We have said many times that the root cause of religious certainty is sin. Beyond that, we are finite beings who have imperfect grasps on reality. The result is that we mess things up. Sometimes we get them so twisted up that it is exceptionally difficult to unravel them.

In this chapter we tried to identify some of the characteristic marks of factual and volitional doubt, along with some of the conditions that often aggravate them considerably. These are not exhaustive lists. Hopefully these items will still show some of the inner workings of these two species of doubt, contributing later to their healing.

Emotional uncertainty is the major focus of this book. But before we investigate it in more detail, it should be carefully noted that the species of doubt are seldom as clearly delineated as our illustrations may indicate. We are whole human beings and factual, emotional, and volitional elements overlap. Doubt is no exception: it often reveals a combination of traits.

Medical doctors are often confronted by a similar phenomenon. They must also view multiple symptoms and treat the major one(s) causing the

discomfort. So we must endeavour to do the same. The prominent, painful elements of doubt should be located and identified as closely as possible so they can be treated, whatever the species.

Now read Chapter 4 of the book: ["Emotional Doubt: What If...?"](#).