



The Thomas Factor - Chapter 5: A Solid Foundation

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

This is Chapter 5 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 5 - A Solid Foundation

Years ago I spoke at Stanford University on the subject of religious doubt. I addressed most of my comments that evening to the topic of emotional questions about faith. During the discussion afterwards, a student offered an especially penetrating protest that I have repeated in many of my lectures since.

As I recall, he said: "Of course these techniques you are suggesting will work – they are based on sound psychological principles. But this amounts to nothing but mind-bending. We may change our perspective on the subject, yet that's all that changes." He was objecting that, while we may alter our thinking in order to avoid the accompanying pain in our lives, it was all simply a cerebral exercise. True, we may thereby eliminate the mental anguish, but what additional benefit was there in the "real world"? I had to admit that it was an impressive complaint, indeed.

I responded, "Your charge is totally correct – if Christianity is not true. If the Christian faith is not true to reality, then, yes, all we can hope for is the quieting of the emotional pain in our lives. Let's just note in passing that this would still be a very positive effect in itself. Yet, as helpful as that might be, you have put it rather succinctly – we would only be mind bending."

"But," I continued, "the entire issue rests on whether Christianity is true – out in the 'real world.' If it is correct, it now becomes a more direct issue of whether we will apply that truth to our thinking.

"In other words, if reality is shaped along the lines of the Christian faith, we have a two-fold truth here. We have the truth of the message itself. But we are then left with the challenge of whether we will employ it in our lives. Will we personally fill the prescription and apply the remedy? And here's the crunch: if we fail to apply it, we are not living in accord with the real world! The tables have completely turned on us!"

The student did not offer a follow-up response.

This is nothing short of an astounding realization for us. If Christianity is not true, all we can hope for by applying our approach is to still the emotional pain. This would still be a noteworthy goal in itself, especially since this is what caused the person to seek help in the first place. After all, when we go to a physician, we want healing, not the answer to all of our philosophical questions!

On the other hand, if Christianity is true, we have two trophies for the price of one. Not only do we have this present reality of salve for our emotional pains, but we also have the proper background that guarantees a more lasting, eternal balm. Then both the truth and the application could be ours for the taking. We have our cake and we can eat it, too! What more could we possibly ask for?

Still, we have to choose both to believe the truth and to apply the emotional ointment. If I decide to forego either one, I receive much less benefit than I otherwise could. What a surprising benefit – both facts and healing are mine for the asking! Has there ever been a better offer? Medicine for my deepest emotional hurts in the present and eternal reality for the future are at my fingertips! Even winning the lottery doesn't compare!

Years ago, I had begun to discover this wonderful truth in my own life, during my own times of doubt. But it didn't come without years of intense struggle. And when it did come, it was in a disguised form. I was surprised – and a little angry, I admit – that knowing the facts alone didn't totally heal the hurt. I had spent years on this factual aspect. Sometimes it didn't even take very much of the pain away. How dare it not work? How could it not be the answer I was seeking? Back I would go to my studies. But at least the facts usually kept the infection from spreading!

The point here is that, unless a solid basis exists, any effort to solve doubts might be viewed as a mind game. Thankfully, it may still be the aspirin we need to take for the pain of the moment, but as the student had forcefully pointed out, we want something that is true in the “real world,” too. If Christianity is true, then strategies that are based on this foundation are well-grounded. We do want more than temporary relief.

So that we might know

So is Christianity true? Do we have the basis that we need in order to build the best possible emotional base throughout the remainder of this book?

This is not an apologetics textbook. So we will not provide here any of these arguments. Evangelicalism is privileged, however, to have literally dozens of such volumes at its fingertips. [See other articles under specific categories on bethinking.org for further material, or for some recommended books see Tom Price's article *Studying ... Apologetics?*]

Theism

In this chapter, we will have to be content with the briefest of overviews of some of the avenues at our disposal. Christianity does have a solid, factual foundation that exists at two levels. It can be shown, first of all, that theism is true. This means that a personal God exists who is the Creator of the universe, but who remains separate from the creation. This Being has a relation to the limited, changing persons who live in the world. At this first level, we cannot

differentiate between the religions, but we can learn several crucial truths. Naturalism, which teaches that there is no supernatural realm whatsoever, is the “odd man out” if theism is true. Interestingly, Scripture makes some of these same claims.

That such a God exists is evident from the existence of the world (Hebrews 3:4). Anything that is finite, beginning to exist at a point in time, needs a cause. Contemporary astrophysics clearly teaches that the universe came into being about 15 billion or so years ago. Regardless of how old the universe actually is, if it began to exist at a certain time, then it is finite. As such, it needs a cause for its existence.

The presence of life in the universe also needs an adequate explanation (Acts 17:28). Even a lowly amoeba depends for its existence on the presence of DNA, the building block of life. Yet, the DNA of the amoeba, which makes the organism what it is, contains more information than exists in many scholarly volumes of books! Since DNA is absolutely required in order for life as we know it to exist, the DNA could not have evolved after the first of earth's organisms. We're not talking here about a spark of light or bolt of lightning somehow mysteriously causing the first one-celled creature in a primeval sea, with the DNA coming along later. We must explain the DNA as a fact that guides the beginning of life. This needs to be adequately explained. But how can this incredible complexity, containing more information than is found in several volumes, originate by chance? How could this burst of information co-exist with the initial, one-celled life? Does this appear, at face value, to be the work of a mindless universe, or one that is heading in a specific direction (cf. Psalms 19:1-4; Romans 1:19-20)?

There are many other building blocks of life, too. A single enzyme requires the line-up of a number of amino acids. These amino acids must come in a specific order, without even a single exception. To use the Arabic alphabet as an example, an enzyme requiring 15 amino acids would have to have a line up in A-B-C ... M-N-O order. If even a single amino acid was out of line or in another order, the enzyme would not result! And yet, there are some who would have us believe that the existence of every single enzyme is due to

random ordering that just happened to be right, rather than what it more clearly points toward – the work of a Creator who has a specific plan for creation.

Morality is not just a list of dos and don'ts that someone invented to keep order in our society, or just because things seem to work better that way. There is an intrinsic right and wrong in the universe that is far different from man-made laws such as driving through the green light and stopping for the red one (Romans 2:14-15). The major examples of such moral prescriptions hold not only cross-culturally, but even as grounds for judgment between nations and cultures. The Hitlers of society can be held to an ethical standard of truth. To hold that there are good reasons to reject these objective ethical grounds even appears to be contradictory. The presence of morality is an indicator not only that God has created more than just the physical components of the universe, but also more personal truths, such as our relationships to each other.

The evidence for life after death is especially strong. For example, near-death experiences that are independently verifiable are powerful indicators that some component of our personality survives the death of the physical body. Like morality, this would be another sign that God is interested in us personally. And like the other pointers here, it is a major roadblock for naturalism.

Indications like the finite universe, the prerequisites for life, signs of objective morality, and verified accounts of consciousness after death all argue that persons are not accidents in an impersonal universe. The truthfulness of theism is a far better explanation for all these, as well as other, facts.

Christianity

The second level of response is that Christianity is the specific form of theism that best accounts for additional data available to us. This can be seen from several more lines of evidence, each of which is both more specific and more personal than the general indicators for theism that we just mentioned. As with theism, Scripture also uses arguments like these in order to show the truth of Christianity.

Fulfilled prophecy argues that God is intricately involved in the march of human history. God even proposes prophecy as a test that He is Lord (Isaiah 41:21-24; 45:20-22). Three areas that need to be investigated are those of distinctive city and nation predictions, specifications concerning Israel, and details pertaining to the coming of God's chosen Messiah. I think the best overall case is one that is constructed of a few quality predictions in each category, rather than using larger numbers of less-verifiable instances. The choices would be those that were plainly given beforehand and clearly pertained only to the events in question, in order to rule out vagueness and manipulation. In such instances, the more specific these prophetic details are, the stronger the predictive value that results.

Jesus' miracles are seldom used today in Christian apologetics, but are still a worthwhile evidence in an overall case for Christian theism. Jesus claimed several times that his miracles indicated that his message was true (for examples, Mark 2:10-12; Luke 7:20-22). His followers agreed (John 20:30-31; Acts 2:22). These events are exceptionally well-attested, being found in every level of strata in the four Gospels, and are even admitted by Jesus' enemies. Several of them are either attended by intriguing historical details that can be otherwise verified, or offer other marks of authenticity. Certain examples from recent medical literature reveal some fascinating, evidenced parallels that may argue that God is similarly active today. For reasons like these, contemporary critics treat very seriously these aspects of the Gospels narratives.

Without question, the chief verification of Christian theism comes from the resurrection of Jesus. This extraordinary event can be shown to be historical even when only a bare minimum of historical facts is used, each of which is both admitted by unbelieving critical scholars today, as well as being strongly attested by the known data. Further, alternative attempts to dismiss the resurrection on natural grounds have failed to account for the same data, as even these same critics generally admit. In the New Testament, both Jesus (Matthew 12:39-40; 16:4) and his apostles (Acts 2:22-24; 17:31) pointed to the resurrection as the chief sign that He was God's messenger.

That the Bible is a trustworthy document can be shown through a variety of avenues: manuscript numbers, copying accuracy, archeology, geography, extra-biblical confirmation, ancient legal and other customs, as well as studies concerning the dates and authorship of the writers of the various books. The inspiration of Scripture is also a crucial truth. Fulfilled prophecy points to at least portions of the Bible being God's words (cf. Deuteronomy 18:17-22). Jesus' miracles are helpful in this regard, too (John 14:11). But the strongest argument for inspiration is that this was the testimony of Jesus, whose teachings were confirmed by his resurrection from the dead.

A crucial component of Christianity concerns the deity of Jesus Christ. Not only are Jesus' claims concerning himself (especially as indicated by his titles Son of Man and Son of God) established on very strong textual grounds. They are vindicated by the prophecy he fulfilled, the miracles that he performed, and especially by his resurrection. The latter was the chief indication that God confirmed Jesus' teachings (Acts 2:22-24; 17:31), and his deity, in particular (Romans 1:3-4). After all, God would not raise a heretic from the dead.

On the other hand, there are extremely potent answers to the objections that are raised by the critics of Christianity. Each challenge has been thoroughly researched and explained by competent scholars.

The result has been a large body of data arguing that Christianity is both self-consistent and true. Further, believers have found that their belief makes sense out of life like no other system does, making life worthwhile.

A wide range of fulfilled prophecies, Jesus' miracles, his resurrection from the dead, the nature of Scripture, and the deity of Jesus Christ are formidable arguments for the truth of Christianity. Each plays a key role in showing that this is the proper approach to God. The conclusion is that Christian theism is true.

While witnessing, Richard was asked a question that he couldn't answer adequately. Even though he sensed that he fumbled with the answer, the person to whom he was speaking seemed to be satisfied. Still, Richard grew more bothered about

the subject. So he visited with a friend who was well read in the area of apologetics. Amazingly, Richard's question was answered thoroughly in just a matter of minutes.

"Thanks so much," Richard called out lightheartedly as he waved and left his friend's house. His satisfaction on the issue, even in the days ahead, showed that his doubt was factual in nature.

What about the World Religions?

We live in strange times. In an age where the earth has seemed to grow smaller and the world religions have broken beyond their traditional boundaries, rival religious claims are more commonly heard today. Many Americans know non-Christians, such as the Hindus living in our neighborhoods or the Muslims who work with us side by side. Without much question, these situations have compounded Christian doubt. How can Christianity still be considered to be unique, as it teaches?

But perhaps the answer is even stranger. Surprisingly, Jesus has no real challengers among the founders of the major religious faiths. None of the others even claimed to be God, let alone teaching that they were a unique, one-of-a-kind, divine manifestation of the Almighty. Buddha was very possibly an atheist! Confucius and Lao Tzu were teachers of ethics, not theologians. Abraham, Moses, and David never came close to teaching that they were deity. Neither did Mohammed, who is believed by the Muslim faithful to be Allah's chief prophet, but under no condition to be compared to deity.

Neither do the orthodox followers of the major non-Christian world religions believe that their founders rose from the dead. There is no credible evidence that anything like this ever happened in any case other than that of Jesus Christ. In fact, there is very little that might even be called historical evidences in these belief systems, either. All of this is certainly significant.

At the college that Aimee attended, she often heard that other religions made very similar claims to those made by her Christian friends. It made sense to her that this was the case. Wouldn't believers in other faiths view their founders as being similar to Jesus? She assumed

that this applied to her Buddhist roommate, too. But this conclusion led to questions whenever her pastor preached that Christianity was unique. She decided to do a study in this area for an upcoming research paper that was due in a few weeks.

She was both relieved and amazed to discover that Buddhists do not claim that Buddha was God. Her roommate didn't even know whether or not she was a theist. Further, claims that Buddha performed miracles were taken from religious texts that dated from literally hundreds of years after the wise man lived. Lastly, she discovered no contentions that he was ever raised from the dead. Her friend simply shrugged off the disparities, without further comment.

"I guess there are some major differences, then, and in some central areas, too," Aimee concluded. She was very careful not to sound haughty when talking to her friend. But she was still very pleasantly surprised at the results of her research.

Seeking and Finding God

However, our brief look at some of the arguments for Christianity is only one side of the coin. Judging from the literature, we might get the impression that many Christians don't really care that there is so much evidence for their faith. It is often said that the present generation is searching for experience of God rather than arguments. Far from wanting more intellectual ammunition, they might ask how they can encounter God more fully.

This question is also relevant to doubt. The issue of whether God interacts with us today haunts many, even as it did in biblical times. Is he active in our lives? Why doesn't he reach out to us even more than he does? If personal experience is as important as we are led to believe, then this is a central concern for many believers.

Some scholars think that God respects our freedom enough that he doesn't force himself on us. He is content to lure us to himself by various means, sharing some brief glimpses of what more fellowship with him would be like, without obliging us to seek him. Those who wish to turn from their sin and believe may do so (Romans 6:20-23) by the power of the Holy Spirit, while those who, for whatever reasons, are content not to do so will remain separated from God (Romans 1:18-32).

Why would this be God's approach? Perhaps He desires our love and fellowship without coercion. As the old saying goes, God may have decided that it was better to have loved everyone and lost some than never to have loved any of us at all. But he wants those who come to him to do so by their own choice, not because they must. This is how much he respects the free will with which he created us.

There might be an analogy here to finding a spouse. If we had the ability to force someone to love us merely by making a private decision, we might momentarily entertain the possibility of activating that choice. I think that, as enticing as it might appear, most of us would concede that such forced love is ultimately not worth pursuing. Regardless, there is hardly any question that love that is freely given is better by far. Judging by how he created us, it seems that God apparently thinks so, too.

On this thesis, evidence like that mentioned in this chapter is enough to convince those who look for God with an open mind, but not enough to absolutely prove the truth to those who prefer to ignore him. Those who respond to the wooing of the Holy Spirit find God (Acts 17:1-4; 1 Corinthians 2:11-15; 2 Corinthians 5:16-21), while those who freely reject him get their will, too.

So where do we go from here? God has provided far more than enough evidence for those who are open to it. The question is not why there isn't more data. The real question is whether we will believe and follow him. Like little children who tire of one toy after another on Christmas day, we throw aside God's gifts, demanding that he give us even more. But there are already far more than enough presents to make us eternally happy. We just need to slow down and see what he has already done.

One way to follow God and cultivate our relationship with him is to practice regularly the so-called spiritual disciplines. The main idea here is that Scripture teaches a variety of ways for the believer who wishes to seek God further, and while we pursue some of them, we neglect the majority of avenues that he has provided for ongoing fellowship with him. Studying the Bible, witnessing, fellowship, and prayer are more

popular among believers. But we usually avoid many other practices such as Christian meditation, true worship, fasting, simplicity, service, getting alone with God for times of silence, and so on. This is a very large subject and many recent books have been written on this topic.

Conclusion

What does all of this have to do with the subject of doubt? It is precisely because Christianity has such a firm foundation that strategies dealing with religious uncertainty that are based on this truth are well-established. Not only is the Christian faith true, bringing eternal life to those who trust in God's path, but it is also practical – it still changes lives today and points the way to a meaningful, lasting relationship with him. Like the answer to the Stanford University student, since Christianity is true, we are making the wrong move if we don't take the proper steps of application.

Having a firm foundation that is grounded in the facts can help deal with problems pertaining to the truth of Christianity. While it seldom calms the more raging sorts of worries that come from our emotions or volition, it provides the sort of grounding that is necessary in order to move to these other areas. In the next chapter we will explain that the primary answer to emotional doubt is not to provide more evidence. But it is still crucial that there be such a backdrop of truth.

Yes, believers can experience God more fully and have greater fellowship with him than they have previously had. It costs us our commitment to him, however. How dare we expect God to fill our desires for him at no cost to ourselves? How much time do we reserve for God each day? After all, if we gave our spouse or best friend the same time that we regularly give our Lord, how long would it take our human relationships to crumble?

Now read Chapter 6 of the book: "Mapping a Specific Strategy".