



## The Thomas Factor - Chapter 9: Living with Questions

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

*This is Chapter 9 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 9 - Living with Questions

In the process of addressing emotional doubt, we have raised another question that is so large that it demands a separate treatment. Actually, few subjects raise more doubts than this one. To get over this problem would bring relief to many believers. How can we be content in our Christian lives even though we may still have many unanswered questions, some of them rather major? And how do we face the fact that many brothers and sisters in Christ differ from us in some rather important areas of theology?

Ken was obviously flustered by this whole issue. No, this is a rather glaring understatement. He was absolutely at his wits' end when he called me from his midwest church where he had become a very successful pastor. Even though he had never been my student, I was lumped in with his seminary professors.

"You guys taught us theology," Ken accused, "as if all evangelicals believe the same thing. But I've

discovered that they don't. In fact, they're quite different." Then he dropped the bombshell: "I've just come to think that theology is all a matter of interpretation." Although he didn't say it, he then implied that he was considering leaving the pastorate because of this conclusion!

"Wow!" I said. "All this comes simply from discovering different expressions of theology among believers?"

Ken and I talked for some time. I was reminded that an area that had never really been a concern to me in my doubting days did plague many Christians. But why would they take the conclusion in the direction of Ken's radical stance? I couldn't fathom how he could get where he was for those reasons.

A second example came some years later. I had spent considerable time making several theological distinctions in a doctoral class. One of the students, Gene, was a pastor who had struggled with some similar issues. He came up to me privately and thanked me profusely for the discussion. For years he had been bothered by a particular doctrinal attitude that was not even taught in the Bible! His consternation had come from feeling that he needed to take the company line on a perspective that he never believed. But his questions caused him to have doubts, wondering if he was some sort of hypocrite because he didn't support the *status quo* of his denomination.

What do these two cases have in common? Why do Christians seem so puzzled when they find other believers from a slightly different perspective than their own? How should we handle the special sort of doubt that often results?

### Why are there Theological Differences?

Why are there major distinctions between religious denominations? Why do Bible-believing theologians down through the centuries struggle over enduring questions like the sovereignty of God and the free will of created persons, the perseverance of the saints, the sign gifts, or the age of the earth? How should we respond when we think that we have solved one of these issues for ourselves, only to discover that there are equally well-meaning Christians who do not

agree?

I think one reason these scenarios especially plague Christians is that many of our leaders constantly teach that all truth can be known absolutely. We're also so bold as to imply (if not directly teach) that my interpretation of a particular doctrine is the only possible position on the topic. In short, truth is what I say it is.

This at least adds to the confusion, if not being a chief reason for it. Obviously, if I (along with a few buddies who agree with me) am the sole arbiter of truth, but there are other true believers who disagree, then someone is clearly wrong. Unfortunately, the issue is often solved by imperial edict: "I am your leader and I am right. If you want the truth you'll listen to me." This sort of attitude just adds to the conflict, as well as to the sensitive believer's doubt.

If the Bible is the inspired Word of God, then why should you believe one thing, while I believe another? Is Ken right – is it all just a matter of interpretation? Why are there so many denominations – and differences? Let's begin by noting a few reasons why this may be the case.

Some denominational differences are not theological, but political, social, and even geographical. Historical surveys will show that theologically similar groups were formed either before they came to America, or originated many years ago in different areas of the country. Others share similar theological stances, but tend toward varying political and social views. Social status can account for other differences. Unfortunately, too many deviations from each other are more related to power struggles, church splits, and leadership influence than to biblical interpretation.

Closely aligned with these reasons, changes in the earthly body of Christ over two thousand years have developed doctrinal discussions to levels beyond what is encountered in Scripture. In other words, dozens of cultural, racial, world religious, missionary, and theological situations have pushed Christians to make distinctions that sometimes, frankly, go beyond what we are told about these issues in Scripture. As such, they add to the confusion.

Further, virtually everyone experiences some sort

of doubt simply because they are human beings. We have said throughout that the root cause of our uncertainty is our sin nature. While this does not mean that all doubt is necessarily sin, it does imply that many of our differences are due to the fact that we are finite persons. Questions arise simply because, by nature, we don't know all the answers. Yet, we sometimes respond by dogmatically asserting what we don't know.

These initial responses can explain a fair amount of the theological differences among believers. But they do not explain them all. Our last answer will probably shock many readers. Maybe the Bible Itself does not always clarify all these answers.

Who says Scripture has to clear up every doctrinal matter? Is it possible that there are many items that God simply didn't want to tell us? If this is so, much of our confusion would then come from our attempting to force issues and place God's truth within boundaries. We need to admit that it is inviting, to say the least, to think that we have been given the keys to all theological truth. That would be just like humans, wouldn't it – to take dogmatic stands on subjects where we don't have enough data to make these judgments?

I think there is clear biblical precedent for this view. Job concluded that he knew enough about God to trust Him in those things that he didn't know (Job 42:1-6). Remember that Job never received an answer from the Lord concerning the reason for his suffering, yet he was blessed. Why? Scripture tells us that God's ways are not the same as ours, but are higher than ours (Isaiah 55:8-9). How many times throughout history has God not explained a similar question to a hurting believer?

Let me take a further step – and perhaps a startling one. I think the New Testament provides other examples where certain areas were purposely left unresolved. One excellent instance comes from a topic that is still in the forefront of current discussions today – the time of Jesus Christ's return for His church. In answer to His disciples' question (Mark 13:3-4), our Lord warned us that He didn't even know the time for this event and that we always needed to remain alert and ready (13:32-37). Later the disciples asked again, and again they heard the same answer – God was the

sole Authority on this subject and He alone knew the time of the end (Acts 1:6-7).

But Christians today repeatedly qualify Jesus' remarks so that, while we don't know the exact moment of His return, we presume to know at least the decade! Believers have been responding this way for centuries, in distinction to Jesus' admonitions to make sure that we are looking for His return without worrying about the timing. That knowledge has simply not been given to us.

There is another sort of example where clear direction is not given to believers. We are even told that it is permissible for different Christians to hold more than one view on certain personal, ethical, or theological subjects, without the writer resolving the differences for us.

To begin, take the personal argument between Paul and Barnabas. The quarrel was so sharp that the two missionaries split up (Acts 15:36-41). It would seem from Luke's choice of words in verse 39 that the matter was rather heated. Of course, it might just be concluded that this was a clash of personalities that is inevitable whenever human beings work together long enough, and that would be fair. But we still don't want to miss the obvious point: either Paul or Barnabas was ultimately right or wrong. But Luke never tells us the answer. Apparently, that was not his purpose. And neither do we have to jump in and decide, as we attempt to do with so many other issues!

There were other times when there were clashes between early Christians, with verdicts being given. The dispute between the two apostles, Paul and Peter, contained theological roots, as well as a personal element. Paul states that Peter was wrong (Galatians 2:11-14). Scholars are not sure whether Acts 15:1-35 and Galatians 2:1-10 are the same occasion. So we have either one or two situations where unnamed Christians who pushed the issue of Law observance brought about an early apostolic assembly to decide the nature of the gospel. In both texts, Paul was vindicated.

In Romans 14:1-4, the same apostle Paul who disagreed with Barnabas and announced Peter's error turns to ethical differences between early believers without casting any blame. In fact, he specifically tells his readers not to pass judgment

in certain disputes like that of diet. Both he who eats meat and he who does not is accepted by God (14:4b, 6b, 10). Similarly, Paul addresses the question of eating meat offered to idols by declaring that the one who refuses to eat is no better off than the one who eats (1 Corinthians 8:7-8; cf. 1 Corinthians 10:25-30).

But personal and ethical issues are not the only ones on which Paul fails to take sides. He also addresses a topic of crucial theological significance in the early church – that of the observance of special days. Paul probably has in mind here the earth-shaking subject of Sabbath observance, that split Gentile and Jewish believers. Once again, he judges that there is room for different convictions. Paul was perhaps at least open to Jewish believers who wished to observe the Sabbath (Romans 14:5-6, 10).

This is really an incredible conclusion in light of Paul's comments elsewhere that the observance of special days may indicate that a person is no longer following the path of God's grace (Galatians 4:10-11; cf. 3:1-3). Sabbaths were shadows of future realities fulfilled by Christ (Colossians 2:16-17).

Perhaps the key is that Paul thought Jewish believers had an option that Gentile believers, who don't obey the Jewish Law, didn't have. But in Romans 14:5b, he allows everyone to be persuaded by their own convictions, without any absolute commands.

But amid the freedom that believers have on such matters (Galatians 2:4; 1 Corinthians 10:30), Paul still cautions us not to be stumbling blocks to weaker believers. If others are bothered by our actions, we should refrain from pursuing our will when we are with them (1 Corinthians 8:9-13; 10:23-33). All believers work for the same purposes, to bring people to Christ and to edify believers (1 Corinthians 3:1-9, 22-23; 10:23-24, 31-33). So we may have to subject our freedom to our ministry objectives.

In sum, our last reason for the presence of differences among believers is that Scripture seems to teach that not all issues – personal, ethical, or even doctrinal – can be figured out (as with Job's lesson or the time of Jesus' return), or decided in strict terms (as with the various issues

in Paul). But we will variously ignore the biblical teaching on some topics, plunge in where we have not been given full instruction on others, or force rules of various sorts on all Christians.

Our conclusion is that we have created yet another false belief here! While some Christians seem to think that biblical areas are always knowable in concrete terms, this is plainly not the case. Often we allow external, non-biblical reasons to create turmoil, forcing answers beyond the clear data in Scripture. We also ignore the facts that the Bible specifically tells us both that we will not always know certain things, and even that more than one view on a subject is not necessarily bad. So why do we finite beings think that we can always figure out all theological matters?

Since we are human beings, questioning to one extent or another will probably be a lifelong experience. So get used to it! We should not attempt to reach some sort of utopia in this life where there are no more uncertainties. They will always be present with us. But these need not be the same as doubts. One important question, then, is how we should differentiate those matters that we will not always know from those that we must know in order to be orthodox believers. This is a crucial distinction. Maybe we will find some concealed blessings along the way – some personal freedom and a new appreciation of others in the body of Christ with whom we do not agree on 100% of all issues.

## Differentiating Theology

One way to answer the critical question concerning Christianity's non-negotiable areas of theology is to distinguish between beliefs that are absolutely indispensable and those that demand further research. But how do we do this? What are the parameters for such a study?

There are several ways to help us establish our fundamental beliefs. Crucial doctrines that are foundational to Christianity have at least four earmarks that set them apart. They are clearly taught in Scripture, as well as being identified as centrally important. There are also strong evidential reasons to accept each one. (Some of these reasons were mentioned ever so briefly in Chapter 6.) Lastly, they occur prominently in

classic Christian statements of faith down through the ages. In sum, the fundamental doctrines not only figure both clearly and prominently in Scripture, but are also supported strongly in terms of both apologetics and church history.

At the head of the list belongs the content of the gospel. What is the absolute minimum of data that makes up the heart of the Christian faith? When Paul defines his central message, there are three doctrines that are repeated each time: the Deity, death, and resurrection of Jesus. One is saved by exercising faith in the Person of Jesus Christ, in light of these truths (Romans 10:9; 1 Corinthians 15:3-4; 2 Timothy 2:8-9). Other items are also mentioned, but it appears that these are the only ones always included without exception.

Besides faith in the gospel, other fundamental doctrines that fulfill our four criteria include the belief in one God (Deuteronomy 6:4), in three separate Persons (Ephesians 4:4-6), creation (Genesis 1:1-3; Colossians 1:16), the inspiration of Scripture (2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 1:21), the virgin birth (Matthew 1:18-23) and incarnation of Jesus Christ (John 1:14), His Second Coming (Acts 1:9-11; Revelation 1:7), the sinful nature of human beings (Romans 3:23; 6:23), eternal life for believers (John 6:47; 14:1-4), and eternal judgment for unbelievers (Daniel 12:2; Matthew 25:41-46).

Actually, there is widespread agreement among orthodox believers on at least the general contours of these doctrines, and especially concerning faith in the Jesus Christ of the gospel. This is the case whatever the specific denomination. Disagreements and distinctives usually come in less crucial areas.

One way to discern the difference between absolutely crucial matters of theology and secondary ones is to ask whether one's beliefs on either side of that issue would threaten the essence of the Christian faith. The vast majority of the heated disputes among Christians would cause absolutely no adjustment to ultimate truth. They are lesser problems that we must not allow to prey on our emotions because they do not actually affect our faith whatever the view taken, within reason. (Obviously, someone could still take one these non-fundamental options to a ridiculous point. We're not addressing that.)

There are numerous examples of hot issues that do not affect the central truth of Christianity. They include such major controversies as the specific date of creation, the time of the rapture, the present existence of the "sign" spiritual gifts, perseverance of the saints, dispensationalism, or the varieties of church worship and government.

So that we are not misunderstood here, we need to quickly add that discussions on such issues are still needed. It is important that we formulate our own views concerning them. This is especially the case with preaching in local churches or when teaching theology. So the outcome of these questions is important. Non-fundamental theology is just that – not insignificant or inconsequential theology. Pastors and other teachers can both be clear about their own position, as well as pointing out that other believers hold alternative views. This should help situations like Ken's above.

However, since answers to secondary theological matters do not affect the truthfulness of the Christian faith, regardless of their outcome, differences on these subjects should not cause Christians to doubt. In other words, emotional theological quandaries should not result from topics that do not affect our eternal destiny.

Then we can move a step further. Not only should such differences not bother us, but we should actually celebrate them. It is nothing short of a great blessing to have the freedom in the body of Christ to hold divergent opinions on secondary matters. Differences of various sorts were present in the New Testament and are even more the case today. We should encourage believers to sit down with one another amicably, open up Scripture, and learn from each other. To share this common basis over a cup of coffee should be exhilarating.

Making such theological distinctions is crucial for our discussion of doubt. We must be able to give our attention to any number of theological matters, and enjoy doing it, but without causing any anxiety.

This is roughly what I explained to Ken that night he called. Once he distinguished primary from secondary doctrine, he recognized that his objection no longer had the force that he thought

it did. So what if all evangelicals don't agree on all the specifics of secondary doctrine? Further, he realized that the firm basis for the fundamental doctrines, with as many as four types of checks and balances, certainly disproved his claim that these beliefs were just a matter of interpretation. Ken was not only significantly relieved, but in the many conversations we've had in the ten years or so since that evening, he has never struggled again with this issue. Today, he just smiles and shakes his head when the topic comes up. "Bad night," he quips. But that's the heart of emotional doubt in a nutshell!

## Conclusion

Kelly used to feel uncomfortable whenever her pastor prefaced a discussion by indicating that sincere Christians were divided over a certain issue. And it even troubled her when he explained that he just wanted to be honest about tough portions of Scripture. But she was especially relieved when, during a private conversation, he pointed out that none of these matters had any effect on the truthfulness of Christianity or her salvation. In fact, he explained how such an honest attitude allowed Christians to both take a personal view on the doctrine, as well as actually being excited about the continuing opportunity to study the matter.

Jarrod had a question about the doctrine of creation, which he rightly thought was one of Christianity's central tenets. Doing some research on the topic, he developed his own list of reasons for believing it. As a result, he was assured that this doctrine was both central and well evidenced.

Believers often experience doubt simply because they do not agree with each other concerning doctrinal issues that do not ultimately affect their faith either way, although these are still important areas of theology. We can live with questions like these, just as Christians did in the earliest church. Making distinctions like we have made here can keep us from unneeded uncertainty. Far from allowing difficult issues to cause us anxiety, this subject should actually even encourage us in that God has allowed freedom in the body of Christ.

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