



The Thomas Factor - Introduction

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

This is the Introduction to 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 with links to each chapter is also available.

Introduction: Defining Religious Doubt

Our newspaper headlines tell the story. We are winning the battle against many dreaded diseases, but new ones are taking their places. Instead of physical calamities like tuberculosis, polio, typhoid fever, and malaria, we have made a switch. Now we have traded for emotional sicknesses like anxiety disorders and various kinds of clinical depression. The latter may even be far worse than the former. Perhaps more common, especially on less severe scales, many think that the emotional sicknesses affect life far more, are more difficult to deal with, and are far more painful than their physical counterparts.

Some have called the last few decades the 'Age of Anxiety'. It seems that few descriptions provide a better idea of what this generation is about. We are worriers. We are concerned about every conceivable sort of situation. Yes, almost gone are the days when Russia pushing the button is our chief distress. Gone, too, is the apprehension that I or some loved one might be drafted to fight

in some foreign jungle.

But new problems have taken their places. Will I get AIDS? Can my children even be raised today without contacting many opportunities for drugs and pre-marital sex? What if they make the wrong decision, especially given contemporary forms of peer pressure? Will some crazed individual walk into our local school or restaurant and open fire? We have heard that so-called Generation X is the first generation to conclude that their world will be worse than that of their parents. What does that mean?

In some ways our questions have grown more philosophical, too. Are traditional values passé? Is anything always right or wrong, or does it depend on the situation? Is it even possible to find Truth today (with a capital 'T')? Can something be true for me and not for you?

Given our penchant to worry, is it any surprise that our fretting has moved over into the religious realm, too? Why should this be any different from the rest of our life? On the one hand, believers would like to think that, when it comes to their faith, they are rock-solid. Nothing should ever affect me there. But on the other hand, maybe I've never been particularly successful conquering worry wherever it rears its unwanted head. So why should my beliefs be any different? Thus, for many Christians today, few things seem to be more common than questions about one's faith.

Reflecting a bit further on the topic, it might occur to us that, in some ways, religious doubt is not all that different from non-religious doubt. Both of these are concerned with topics that are very dear to us. After all, why would we waste time thinking about something that doesn't really matter one way or the other? And both can also involve similar thinking patterns. 'What if I get AIDS?' or 'What if I get fired?' are not that much different from 'What if I'm really not saved?' Of course, a difference lies in the fact that religious questions concern God, who should be our chief concern (Matthew 22:37-38). But is this always the way it is in life? While convicting, it is just not the case that believers are always most concerned about the things of God.

Somehow it's comforting to learn that other Christians almost always experience doubts

about their own beliefs, too. The experts tell us that being worried by both religious and non-religious questions is simply a normal part of human life and development. In particular, religious questions of one sort or another have occurred to virtually everyone at some time.

This book is for Christians who doubt. It is addressed to those who are uneasy about their faith in any of several ways. But more specifically, we are chiefly interested in questions that take an emotional form. What happens when our faith somehow gets messed up with our anxieties? What do I do when worries about life shift to my most personal and cherished beliefs? Why must faith seem so difficult? Doesn't God care that I am really hurting? But I have always heard that true Christians don't have these thoughts, so am I not really saved, then? At the final Judgment, will Jesus say that he never knew me? I don't seem to remember many of the saints in the Bible fighting these sorts of battles.

Our primary purpose is to address this emotional side of faith, as a symptom of the larger problem of worry. How do we overcome emotional hurdles to our belief? How do I keep believing what I know is true? Why can't I just rest in my faith and enjoy the Christian life? Or conversely, when I'm worried, why can't the solution be an easy one? Why can't I just take two aspirins and go to bed? Why must it all be so complicated?

I am not a psychologist. This is not a psychology text. I have come to these issues from an intensely personal perspective. I questioned my own faith for ten straight years, then off and on for perhaps another five years. It got to the point where these matters were the predominant thoughts in my mind. They were the last thing I contemplated when I crawled, exhausted, into bed. They were the first items to greet me when I rose in the morning: 'Where did I leave off the night before?' I hated (This may still not be a strong enough term!) my doubts with every fiber of my being. I wondered if I would ever overcome them, or if it was even possible to do so.

These questions pushed me on a personal quest. The area of apologetics (defending the faith) quickly became my favorite topic of study. I told

myself repeatedly that a good dose of evidences would solve all of my doubts. What I found out, many years and thousands of books later, was that having a firm foundation was always helpful as a base. However, while it could certainly address certain sorts of questions, it was impotent against other forms of doubt. That was a shock. But that lesson came chiefly from listening to others and reflecting on what I had learned.

Another important personal discovery came during the time when I pastored a couple of churches. I realized that some kinds of uncertainty were also the most common questions I heard in pastoral counseling. I finished my doctorate and began teaching college and the lesson continued. Probably because they discovered a 'fellow doubter', as one student proclaimed, I started to attract others who were similarly plagued. More and more people called, and they surprisingly included both unbelievers as well as believers. It seemed that this was a subject that affected most people at some time.

Early in the process, I began to take notes. I kept a card file on each person, including their specific type of question, how it originated, and what approach seemed most to help. Each time, I sought to uncover and record a specific lesson. Surprisingly, the numbers mounted to over one hundred hurting persons. At several points, I was shocked. Doubt was becoming much more multi-faceted than I had ever imagined. And the same solution that helped one person was very frequently not what the next person needed. I had to be versatile!

I was intrigued by these differences. I tried to think through each aspect very carefully. Why were there different starting points? Why did doubt seem so emotionally-based on some occasions but not others? Why did some doubters barely seem to care that they were bothered? Some questions appeared to be rather simple, while others were compounded by multiple factors. The differences could not all be explained on the basis of the various personalities involved.

Theory very quickly became melded to practice. It had to be or I would soon have nothing to say to those who sought advice. It was one thing to lecture on the subject. It was another to go through it oneself. But it was different again to be

asked by a hurting individual to help them quiet the pain. All these various aspects needed to be combined. Something needed to make sense of the loose ends. Where was a theory that was large enough that, like an umbrella, it could shield those who sat under it?

This book is a popular attempt to share what I found over these years of personal experience, study, lecturing, and sharing. It is written to Christians who are either suffering from doubt or who want to assist others who are hurting. It is not a technical text. It is written in a popular style with the hope that the lack of specialized jargon and references to dozens of other books will help those who struggle. For those who are interested, an earlier, different volume, contained in the bibliography, provides more of the theory involved.

Achieving our goal will involve accomplishing two major purposes. Initially, we will survey the subject in the first five chapters. Few topics involve so much confusion and so many mistaken beliefs. Frequently the truth is precisely the opposite of what we have been taught. Pain often results from trying to reconcile contradictory advice. That's one reason why an overview is so important. Like a medical problem, unless the dilemma is correctly identified, it may never be properly treated.

There are also different species of doubt. We will zero in on the three major types, concentrating on emotional doubt, in particular. It is probably the most common, as well as the most painful, variety. It demands a remedy. In the second half of the book, our central theme is to address the more obvious side-effects of emotional doubt and attempt to provide some hints for its successful treatment. Achieving a workable solution is important in order to deal with the contorted thinking, as well as the amount of pain, that are sometimes involved.

While emotional doubt can still produce many positive consequences, it frequently also causes situations that demand attention. We want to profile its nature, as well as provide some hints for dealing with this common modern phenomenon.

Along the way, I will use many illustrations and stories about people who have dealt with religious uncertainty. In no case is a specific person being

discussed, to avoid any identification. Rather, I have changed names, significant circumstances, and other details, or used composites that reproduce typical questions that I have heard in twenty years of listening and lecturing on this topic. Still, I have concentrated on the essence of the situation so the reader can benefit from it.

Have you ever questioned the existence of God? That the Bible is really God's Word to us? What about difficult texts in Scripture, or the miracles that are recorded there? Do supernatural items like these seem difficult to believe for modern persons in the twenty-first century?

What about your own faith? Have you ever wondered if you were truly a Christian? Or questioned whether you said the right words when you trusted Christ as your Savior? How much repentance is enough? What if you're pretty sure that you did the right thing, but you just want to be more sure?

How strong is your motivation to follow God? How about the strength of your faith – do you question God easily? Does your belief fluctuate, seemingly dependent on what is happening in your life or how you are doing on a particular day? Or do you think it would take a lot for you to doubt the truth of Christianity? Do you ever feel like you don't want to follow Jesus any more?

Welcome to the subject of religious doubt! It comes in several forms and is far more common than most believers think. Later we will discuss three different species of uncertainty: factual, emotional, and volitional. I characterize them this way both because they seem to have three different root causes, as well as responding best to three sorts of solutions. But we will say more about all of this in chapter 4.

These three species of doubt can each be subdivided into the most common categories of questions. To complicate things further, however, the same question does not always indicate the same root cause. Frequently it is the case that it is not what is being asked as much as it is why and how is it being asked. This is just another reason why the topic can be a maze of problems and proposed solutions.

One familiar category concerns whether certain aspects of Christianity are true. Another is the commonly expressed need of personal assurance of salvation: how do I know if I really am saved? Uncertainty also comes in the form of other common questions. Why do bad things happen to those who try their best to follow the Lord? Why aren't our prayers answered? It would seem that most believers have wrestled at some time with notions such as these.

Cindy was a young believer who had been taught that doubt was merely a synonym for unbelief. While struggling with her own assurance of salvation, she met Sarah, a Christian who openly asked questions about several aspects of Christianity. Cindy became confused one day when she heard Sarah comment: 'There's really no difference, you know. One sort of question about God is the same as another.' Startled, Cindy never asked Sarah what she meant. Were both of them doing the same thing? Privately, Cindy began to worry that perhaps neither of them was truly saved.

In the New Testament there are at least a half dozen Greek words that describe the general condition that we have called doubt. They can also have other meanings, as well, such as puzzlement or wondering. When used in the sense that is relevant for us, key meanings include uncertainty or hesitation between two positions, but there are differences. Interestingly, they are applied to believers and unbelievers alike.

) Jesus (John 10:24).

) when warning his listeners about anxious worry (Luke 12:29).

Such words regularly indicate a state of vacillation or questioning, even of anxiety, despair, or unbelief. There is also much variety in the use of these terms, depending on the context. So doubt covers a fairly wide range of possible states of mind, with some diversity regarding the particular nuance. It can tend in the direction of unbelief. But it is commonly used of true believers who lack assurance. We will see a number of examples in the next chapter.

It is instructive that there are no hard lines of distinction here, either. Both believers and unbelievers doubted Jesus, for example. Both Jesus and James scold those with weak faith. So we are not to take these states of mind lightly. Neither are we free to make comments implying that doubt is always a positive state or that it isn't potentially dangerous. We do need to deal with it.

But the other side needs to be noted, too. Not all states of doubt are created equal, largely because doubt doesn't always say the same thing. Even in Scripture, it is not always rebuked. Sometimes it even preceded victory.

For the purposes of this book, we will define doubt as the lack of certainty about the truthfulness of Christianity, one's own faith, or how it applies to real life situations. Except for occasional comments, especially in the next chapter, we will address ourselves only to believers.

In short, this book is addressed to Christians who question. The way we will use it, the term doubt is not necessarily the opposite of faith. Literally dozens of verses in Scripture tell us that true believers can and do suffer from this condition. It even ravaged their lives. And doubt can affect one's faith, at least eventually. But for others, it was a predicament that strengthened faith.

So do all Christians experience doubt at some time in their lives? Where are these biblical examples of doubting believers? What about unbelievers? This takes us to our next subject.

Now read Chapter 1 of the book: "Both Believers and Unbelievers".