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## WHEN RELIGIOUS DOUBT GROWS AGONIZING

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### SYNOPSIS

Emotional religious doubt presents an enigma. Exceptionally prevalent and sometimes excruciatingly painful, religious doubt is experienced by believers in a wide variety of ways. Distraught sentiments often appear habitually as agonized “What if...?” scenarios. Viewed in the context of other forms of doubt, there are many differences. However, the common notions of how to progress toward healing doubt are frequently very wide of the mark, and can be counterproductive. For example, Christian evidences by themselves rarely halt the pain. This version of uncertainty generally requires some additional attention to emotive elements, which are the most disruptive feature. In Scripture, we discover many questioning believers as well as much prescriptive advice regarding how to deal with emotional hurt. Combined with some exceptionally helpful principles from contemporary Christian counseling, emotional doubt can often be lessened significantly, or even healed. Further, the resulting discipline can be helpful in other areas of the Christian life, as well.

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Religious doubt comes in all shapes and sizes. It seems to make no significant difference whether or not one is a Christian.<sup>1</sup> Rather, people doubt because they are finite beings. They also doubt because they are sinners. This uncertainty appears to be caused by all sorts of instigators, too. One can easily get the impression that life plagues us, provoking enormous questions.

Moreover, there are different kinds of doubt. A factual quandary is not the same as an issue that sets off our emotions. Neither is an apparently unsolvable philosophical conundrum the same as the lack of motivation or even anger directed at God that sometimes results from prolonged uncertainty.

However, even the most difficult questions can be answered by someone. Perhaps most crucially, emotional pain levels can be lowered significantly, if not virtually cured. We will direct ourselves to some of these issues in this article. However, it also should be made clear at the outset that some cases are so personally devastating or traumatizing that they may require medical intervention.<sup>2</sup>

## CHARACTERISTICS OF EMOTIONAL DOUBT

By way of definition, I often identify religious doubt as uncertainty regarding God or our relationship to Him, as indicated by questions such as the personal assurance that one is a believer, how it can be known that one's beliefs are true, why terrible things may happen in life, or why God seems to be so silent toward us. Unbelievers may experience similar quandaries about their own religious questions, but in this article, I will be addressing Christian believers.

Within the overall category of religious uncertainty, hundreds of discussions with doubters led to my identification of three subspecies: factual or philosophical, emotional, and volitional issues. They are listed in this order because doubt often moves in this direction. Even beginning with casual questions, when these fail to be answered to the individual's satisfaction, the situation often migrates to a more emotional level: "So why doesn't God answer me when I have asked Him repeatedly? Didn't He promise to give wisdom when asked?"

This insistence often festers into even deeper levels of emotional hurt. Sometimes the believer remains right there, living with the incongruity in her (or his) life. But sometimes, usually over a longer period of time, the doubter may grow bitter and reach a volitional impasse where she simply wants to retreat altogether from these sorts of religious discussions: God can stay in His half of the universe and just leave her alone.

Factual or philosophical doubt often concerns either evidential issues of a historical nature, such as the veracity of the resurrection of Jesus or the truthfulness of Scripture, or more abstract philosophical questions such as the existence of God or the problem of pain and suffering. Answering relevant questions like these often affords the greatest relief for these questioners.

Emotional doubt is much more closely interconnected with one's feelings and often surfaces in distressed expressions. Questions quite frequently emerge as distraught "what if" challenges that concentrate not on the actual evidence or answers as much as the mere prospect that we could just somehow be misguided.

More advanced forms of volitional doubt often bypass the specific issues and details altogether and simply prefer to leave the subject alone. This variety is frequently uninterested in theological or evidential discussions, or even in answering one's own questions, and may have progressed to a deadened or "burned out" state that lacks the motivation to practice one's beliefs. Often following some kind of emotional hurt of a religious nature, such as a trusted pastor experiencing a moral lapse, the volitional doubter at worst may seem to avoid outward religious expression, sometimes due to anger at God.

Of these three varieties of religious doubt, factual or philosophical expressions are often less complicated in terms of dealing with painful issues, though the subject matter is usually more intellectual and often requires more sophisticated answers. Ideally, when the questions are addressed adequately, the issue is over.

Emotional doubt is the most common, as well as the most painful, presumably due at least in part to the presence of anxiety, depression, and perhaps anger. It

frequently tends to invite more intervention. The same old questions are habitually repeated, almost regardless of the answers that are provided.

The more developed expressions of volitional doubt can be the most difficult and also the most spiritually dangerous variety to address, with a prominent issue concerning how to motivate those who seem not to possess or desire any religious motivation.

Overall, few subjects provide such a haven for misconceptions or incorrect notions than religious doubt. For example, Christians too frequently conclude that raising questions always opposes faith, or that it is simply sinful. Further, doubters sometimes wonder if they are the only ones in the world who experience such a plague, or if their uncertainty can ever produce positive results. It is common for believers of various sorts to ignore the many examples of doubting saints in Scripture. And it is often thought that studying Christian evidences is always the chief avenue to a cure for doubt.

Due to emotional doubt affecting such large numbers of persons, including the pain levels frequently involved, I will concentrate on this variety for the remainder of this article. My chief goal is to recommend a biblical strategy for substantial healing, since this can often be achieved, by God's grace.<sup>3</sup>

### **EMPLOYING A BIBLICAL APPROACH**

It has been mentioned that distraught emotional states such as anxiety or depression often plague the emotional doubter. Among the many current psychological models for treating such emotions, secular psychologist<sup>4</sup> Albert Ellis's A-B-C technique is certainly among the best known and most influential.<sup>5</sup> In common with most other cognitive-behavioral strategies, it emphasizes that proper reasoning techniques should take precedence in dealing with emotional stress. This general theory and its techniques have been confirmed by testing in hundreds of studies.<sup>6</sup>

For example, neither one's genetics, life events, calamities, or the malicious actions of others (the "As" of life) are the chief cause of unruly emotions. Rather, the major culprit is what we believe and what we tell ourselves *about* such intrusions into our lives (the "Bs"). In other words, our own thoughts or words actually cause the majority of our worst suffering. Therefore, our improper beliefs, often termed misbeliefs, lies, or cognitive distortions, are what must be addressed in order to experience greater emotional peace and less dissatisfaction in life. Through the highly influential exercise of disputing and replacing these misrepresentations, one may change the consequences (the "Cs") and gain substantial relief from unwanted emotional interruptions.<sup>7</sup>

### **Replacing False Beliefs with Truth**

Contemporary Christian psychologists and counselors often agree with some of these major convictions, while adding crucial nuances or even key adjustments.<sup>8</sup> For example, in a volume that commends and applies the A-B-C method within a Christian context, psychologist Chris Thurman agrees that the many difficulties and disappointments in

our lives are *not* our chief problems. Rather, reminiscent of Ellis, he makes a strong claim: even the *majority* of our unhappiness and emotional suffering is due to the lies that we articulate to ourselves.<sup>9</sup>

For example, an emotional doubter may painfully wonder, without producing any specific reasons, “*What if* Christianity just happens to be false?” They can be challenged to produce a real problem, and reviewing specific evidences might provide a start, but their false beliefs must be confronted head-on. They need to realize that they are being illogical: mere “what ifs” are simply emotional responses, and they do not change reality. Further, they are also being inconsistent: they can respond this way to virtually any crucial area in life, including “what if” their dinner was poisoned, so why do it here? Then they must learn to repeat these and other counter-truths that show their approach to be wrong, until it becomes a habit.

Christian psychologists are sometimes blamed with teaching these theories and techniques simply because they are following the trends of their secular counterparts. So the foremost issue here concerns whether this general approach of exchanging hurtful and untrue language and actions for the truth is merely due to contemporary psychological tendencies, or if it is actually taught in Scripture. The majority of Christian counselors would argue that this is the chief approach found in God’s Word.

For example, in dozens of Scripture passages, believers are commanded to cease their worry and change their downcast demeanors due to the disagreeable aspects of life, and replace these undesirable and destructive thoughts with God’s truth, including prayer, worship, and meditation on such topics as God’s Word, His promises, creation, miracles, and eternal life.<sup>10</sup> Many other times, God’s people are commanded to reject reckless words, anxious or depressing speech and behavior, anger, complaining, envy, or other emotional fixations that lead only to heartache. In place of these practices, we are to teach truthful and uplifting notions, bringing healing and peace to both ourselves and others.<sup>11</sup> Incidentally, many of these passages are among the best samples that describe religious doubt, thereby tying together many of the ideas that we have discussed in this article.

### **A Heavenly Replacement**

One very prominent teaching throughout Scripture permeates dozens of texts. The future eternal life of the believer, along with all its blessings, is one of the central truths that we are told should be recalled, meditated on, and remembered, instead of the daily disturbances that we constantly allow into our thinking. Paul states it so well: we are to meditate on heavenly, rather than earthly, things (Col. 3:2–4). In keeping with one of our primary themes throughout, Paul adds in the same context that we should not lie, because we have changed our thinking and actions (3:9–10).

Jesus taught that anxious emotions both fail to provide for our deepest needs and ignore God’s gracious provisions. Instead, we should purposely ponder heavenly treasures in place of earthly concerns, by single-mindedly seeking God (Matt. 6:19–34). By specifically replacing the earthly anxiety with a mind set on our heavenly blessings, we thereby have comparatively less to be concerned about, for our eternal treasures are

not to be found in this life (6:21, 24; 10:28). It is this contrast that explains the “therefore” in 6:25.

While cataloging an extended and famous list of sins (Rom. 1:21–32), Paul gave a stern warning that some had traded God’s truth for lies (1:25). In sharp contrast, the apostle implored believers to pursue a different route: both to think and to behave differently, altering their minds by changing their thinking (Rom. 12:1–2). One reason for this changed thinking is that the present suffering was not worth comparing to the blessings of eternity (8:18). We have already seen that Paul’s idea of altering our mindset to a heavenly context includes not lying, for we are transformed (Col. 3:1–10). But in still another passage, Paul provides his clearest teaching on replacing our emotional misbeliefs with God’s truth.

### **Paul’s Four Remedies for Anxiety**

The Greek text in Philippians 4:6–9 specifies that Paul’s readers were currently experiencing anxious states of mind (v. 6), so the apostle outlined several paths for breaking this painful thinking. His recommendations are liberating for treating the emotional variety of doubt that manifests fear regarding the topics already mentioned. Reducing or even healing these tendencies to worry would be a huge advantage in treating the emotional doubt here.

Paul’s response to the Philippians’ anxiety is at least fourfold. He begins by commanding that they pray and make their needs known to God (6:6). Peter helpfully provides similar but more detailed guidance to other Christians who were also experiencing anxiety, instructing them to cast these worrisome emotions on God, because He cares for them (1 Pet. 5:7).

For Paul, these prayers should also include thanksgiving to God (6:6; cf. also 1 Thess. 5:16–18; Eph. 5:19–20). Quickly thereafter, the apostle also incorporates praise as a similar component (6:8b). These practices combat emotional distress quite forcefully, like few others, and can be remarkably powerful antidotes to anxiety.

In the ultimate “cognitive” passage, Paul commands his readers to exchange the thinking that encouraged their current anxiety-driven emotions in the first place for God-honoring thoughts (6:8). The Greek term translated “think” indicates a prolonged and single-minded habit that is perhaps best translated as “meditate” (NKJV). Thus, believers were to concentrate deeply and steadily, meditating on God’s truths, internalizing topics such as scriptural teaching on God’s promises, answered prayer, and eternity, instead of the constant ruminations that led to their anxiety.

Lastly, Paul encourages an additional, behavioral component: we need to habitually practice these ideas (6:9). Why does he say this? As C. S. Lewis so fittingly reminds us with a crucial insight, we dare not conclude that Christian truths will automatically remain perched clearly in our minds, just as we first heard and believed them: “Consequently one must train the habit of Faith....make sure that...some of its main doctrines shall be deliberately held before your mind for some time every day. That is why daily prayers and religious reading and church-going are necessary parts of

the Christian life....Neither this belief nor any other will automatically remain alive in the mind. It must be fed."<sup>12</sup>

It is much more likely that, without practice, we will indeed lapse into our old ways of thinking. It's much easier to do so because it's simply who we are apart from Christ.

It does not follow from Paul's detailed pastoral advice regarding anxiety, however, that these four commands must always be practiced together, as a unit, or in precisely the same order. Other passages encourage similar moves, as we have seen in the many texts listed in the notes, and sometimes the advice occurs as a single antidote, or sometimes it involves other practices beyond these that Paul mentions here.

### **APPLYING PAUL'S INSTRUCTIONS TO EMOTIONAL DOUBT**

How may Paul's cognitive and behavioral applications be more specifically applied to the sort of religious doubt that I have described in this article? It was suggested that this approach might provide a pastoral or personal model for treating doubts that are based on anxious uncertainties, or perhaps those stemming from other sorts of potent emotions, as well. Along similar lines, we might recall that some of the other biblical texts I listed provide similar advice for counteracting sadness, despair, anger, and so on. Here we may be addressing the heart of emotional uncertainty from a pastoral and biblical perspective.

Some doubters may be better at praying their worries away, giving them to God in prayer and trusting Him with them, as both Paul and Peter command. Many folks have discovered that past occasions of trusting God with their personal issues have built a foundation from which they can more easily abandon their ever-present concerns to the Lord once again. Sometimes, it all just seems to "click." Other cognitive strategies may buttress the prayer, providing excellent reinforcements here.

Praise and thanksgiving are among the most powerful tools for reorienting our thinking to God's eternal perspective, and personal testimonies from hurting persons indicate that these disciplines can provide almost immediate relief from one's doubts. While lecturing on this subject on dozens of occasions, I usually ask for spontaneous responses from the members of the crowd regarding what happens when they practice praise or worship to God during even intense emotional states of mind. I am most interested when this occurs *during* periods of doubt.

The immediate, unrehearsed response is that, in any of several ways, the doubt lessens. I start hearing comments shouted out such as, "The pain begins to lessen almost immediately," or, "I am able to change the subject for a time without the doubts returning—until I insist on thinking 'What if' again!" Sometimes I hear, "All of a sudden, the problems seem miniscule," or even, "I forgot what I was all worked up about!" My favorite comment is, "I begin to look beyond my issues to life as a whole, and I see them from God's viewpoint."

The repeated commands of Paul and other biblical writers to substitute God's truth and promises in place of our emotions is perhaps the strongest weapon of all.

Christian counselors report that changing our thinking by arguing against the misbeliefs can root out the very causes of religious doubt.

Paul's fourth command about practice is also essential. The best time to do so is precisely while our doubt is rampant. The next most helpful time is when we are *not* suffering. Preventative therapy can insure that doubt's weeds will not ruin life's lawn.

### GOD'S PROVEN PRESCRIPTION

What powerful tools God places at our disposal, free of charge! They are indeed liberating. Perhaps that's why God talks so much in His Word about praise and thanksgiving— He does not need it, but we certainly do. Long-time healing often depends on our continually practicing the proper responses until they become regular habits. We know we are changing when we begin thinking the proper responses even before we are aware that we are doing it.

These practices can really work! In hundreds of discussions with religious doubters, I am told regularly that when spiritual disciplines and techniques like these are applied, the religious doubt usually subsides, sometimes very quickly. Conversely, when nothing is done, the doubt inevitably still remains.

To be sure, the key is not some hocus pocus or the specific implementation of some rote 1, 2, 3-step formula, as we have already seen. Changing hearts is God's business (Phil. 1:6), through His power and the application of His spiritual weapons (2 Cor. 10:3–4). God accomplishes the actual change, for the power and directions are His, even though we are called to be obedient and act (Gal. 5:19–26; 2 Pet. 1:3–11).

Emotional religious doubt is very widespread and is often quite painful. While it is sometimes difficult to eliminate entirely, due to additional health, genetic, or personality factors, its affects can very often be tremendously reduced. The biblical key is the habitual application of spiritual disciplines and principles to our mistaken thinking and behavior.

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#### NOTES

- 1 Jennifer Michael Hecht, *Doubt: A History* (New York: Harper Collins, 2003).
- 2 It should be noted carefully that I am neither a psychiatrist, a psychologist, nor a professional counselor. My comments here fall into the realm of a veteran doubter and long-time observer who is attempting to give some biblical, pastoral, or just plain friendly advice.
- 3 Many more descriptions, suggestions, and other details may be found in Gary R. Habermas, *The Thomas Factor: Using Your Doubts to Grow Closer to God* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1998) and *Dealing with Doubt* (Chicago: Moody, 1990). Both texts are available without charge at [www.garyhabermas.com](http://www.garyhabermas.com).
- 4 I mention this because there are significant differences between secular and Christian psychological positions and advice. For example, see the sources in endnote eight for comparison.

- 5 Raymond Corsini remarks that cognitive techniques are so influential today that “all therapies are essentially cognitive.” *Current Psychotherapies*, ed. Corsini and Danny Wedding, 4th ed. (Itasca, IL: Peacock, 1989), 7.
- 6 Albert Ellis, “Rational-Emotive Therapy” in Corsini and Wedding, 223.
- 7 Ellis, 207, 218; Albert Ellis and Robert A. Harper, *A New Guide to Rational Living*, rev. ed. (New York: Wilshire Book Company, 1975), chaps. 1–6, 16, especially the details on 44–47.
- 8 Good examples include William Backus and Marie Chapien, *Telling Yourself the Truth* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 2000); William Backus, *Telling the Truth to Troubled People* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1985); Chris Thurman, *The Lies We Believe* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1989); David Stoop, *You Are What You Think* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 1996).
- 9 Thurman, 21–24; cf. 54–57.
- 10 For many of these instances, see Psalm 37: 7–8; 39:2; 42:5–6, 11; 43:5; 55:4–8, 16–17, 22; 56:3–4; 57:1–3; 77:11–14; 143:4–7; 2 Corinthians 4:16–18; Philippians 3:18–21; 1 Thessalonians 5:14–18; Colossians 3:1–17; 1 Peter 1:3–9; 5:7.
- 11 Psalm 37: 3–8; 39:2–3a; 42:5 6, 11; 43:5; 73:26; Proverbs 10:21; 12:18, 25; 14:30; 15:13–15; 17:22; 18:21; Lamentations 3:19–24; Ephesians 5:15–20.
- 12 C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 124.