

A 29th Fundamental Belief

**How Many Will
Be Saved?**

**Civil Unions as a
Religious Liberty Issue**

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Adventist *Today*

**Why I Love Atheists,
Agnostics, Backsliders,
Unbelievers, Cultural
Adventists, and
All Who Are at the
Margins of the Faith**





Those with Doubts and Those with None

By Alden Thompson

DOUBT CAN BE FRIGHTENING TO DEVOUT Christians. It seems to be a step too close to an abyss from which there may be no turning back. Yet even the New Testament introduces us to a small cluster of believing doubters. Nicodemus came by night to ask Jesus his questions, and Jesus' own disciples included a "doubting Thomas." Jesus himself could perhaps be included among the doubters as he cried from the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46; Mark 15:34)—though it wasn't long before he returned to complete trust: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" (Luke 23:46, NRSV).

For all that, however, the New Testament seems to ride high on a crest of certainty, with Peter and Saul/Paul leading the way. After his serious denial of the Lord, Peter came roaring back to an active faith. Doubt didn't seem to have played any role at all in his experience. A careless arrogance might be a better description.

As for Saul/Paul, he was the very picture of certainty, both before and after his conversion. I am reminded of G. K. Chesterton's description of Francis of Assisi's conversion: "As soon as ever he had been unhorsed by the glorious humiliation of his vision of dependence on the divine love, he flung himself furiously into battle. He had wheeled his charger clean round, but there was

no halt or check in the thundering impetuosity of his charge.... He devoured fasting as a man devours food. He plunged after poverty as men have dug madly for gold."¹

In many ways, Paul and St. Francis would have made good soulmates.

The Value of Doubt

Yet some modern believers have been brave enough to recognize the heuristic

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value of doubt. George MacDonald put it this way: "To deny the existence of God may ... involve less unbelief than the smallest yielding to doubt of His goodness. I say *yielding*: for a person may be haunted with doubts, and only grow thereby in faith. Doubts are the messengers of the Living One to the honest. They are the first knock at our door of things that are not yet, but have to be, understood.... Doubt must precede every deeper assurance; for uncertainties are what we first see when we look into a region hitherto unknown, unexplored, unannexed."²

But we must turn to the Old Testament for a biblical mandate for doubt—though *permission* is a better term than *mandate*, for nowhere does Scripture actually require a believer to doubt. (Indeed, some believers whose stories are told in Scripture seem to be immune to doubt.) The Old Testament, you see, has a whole genre of literature that is mostly missing from the New Testament: wisdom literature, which divides into so-called "higher" and "lower" wisdom. Ecclesiastes and Job are labeled "higher" wisdom; Proverbs is the best example of lower wisdom.

To be sure, a touch of modern conceit lurks in those labels, for doubt (Ecclesiastes and Job) seems to rank higher in the modern mind than certainty (Proverbs). And no matter how one might establish the relative value of doubt over certainty, the labels clearly rank doubt higher than certainty.

But before we become too eager to place one above the other, we must admit that a world in which no one asks any questions would be as dysfunctional as a world in which everyone was always asking questions. In a classroom, for example, every teacher prays that there will be a sprinkling of students with good questions. Too many of such students in one class would result, of course, in a cacophony that would certainly be the enemy of learning.

Questions or No Questions

At the level of personal friendship, the same dynamic can also be at work. I vividly remember a conversation with two women following one of the sessions in a weekend seminar I was holding at the Adventist church in Paradise, California. One of the women was full of questions. The other stood quietly by, listening. After I answered the questions as best I could, I said to the two of them. “Let me suggest the way your friendship works in connection with the life of faith.” Then, turning to the one who was full of questions, I observed: “For you, it is terribly important that you have the freedom to ask your questions. Your friend here does not have the same need but is quite ready to listen and is glad that you are willing and able to ask your questions. Indeed, her more placid perspective provides stability for you, an anchor that enables and empowers you to explore. Thus the two of you, though very different, have bonded together in a meaningful and mutually helpful friendship.”

The two women looked at each other and burst out laughing. “That’s exactly how it works,” they said.

Interestingly, the one with many questions (Ecclesiastes) and the one with no questions (Proverbs) not only sit side-by-side in church, but also are next-door neighbors in our English Bibles.

Ecclesiastes

So let’s take a closer look at each of those authors to see how they viewed our world. Ecclesiastes is the more amazing of the two. Indeed, evangelical author Walter Martin of anti-cult fame went so far as to declare that only the last chapter could really be inspired. He wrote: “It is almost universally agreed among Biblical scholars that Ecclesiastes portrays Solomon’s apostasy and is therefore virtually

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worthless for determining doctrine. It sketches man’s ‘life under the sun’ and reveals the hopelessness of the soul apart from God. The conclusion of the Book alone mirrors the true revelation of God (chap. 12).²³

In many ways, Ecclesiastes is a unique book in the Bible. Nothing even remotely like it is found in the New Testament, and even in the Old Testament it stands alone. Under the heading of “remarkable”

vocabulary, these words and phrases are worth noting: “vanity of vanities, all is vanity” provides the bookends for the book, appearing at the beginning (1:2) and just before the epilogue (12:8). Altogether, the word “vanity” occurs 31 times in the book and only three times in all the rest of the Old Testament. A companion phrase with a similar thrust is “a chasing after wind,” which occurs nine times in Ecclesiastes. In body language that would translate into a massive shrug.

So what’s the author’s remedy or solution? *Enjoy* life! The verb occurs nine times in Ecclesiastes and only 15 times elsewhere. The noun “enjoyment” occurs six times in Ecclesiastes and only once elsewhere. Finally, a phrase that occurs five times in the book is “eat and drink”! In short, nothing makes sense—so one might as well enjoy life while it lasts. Indeed, one could almost see 3:11-15 as the author’s motto: “God has made everything beautiful for its own time. He has planted eternity in the human heart, but even so, people cannot see the whole scope of God’s work from beginning to end. So I concluded there is nothing better than to be happy and enjoy ourselves as long as we can. And people should eat and drink and enjoy the fruits of their labor, for these are gifts from God” (Eccl. 3:11-15, NLT).

Proverbs

Now let’s look more closely at Proverbs as we ponder how the two authors could see the same world so differently. We have seen that in Ecclesiastes, all efforts to get

wisdom are only “a chasing after wind. For in much wisdom is much vexation” (1:17-18, NRSV).

In Proverbs, though, “wisdom” is one of God’s best gifts: “Happy are those who find wisdom” is the exclamation in 3:13 (NRSV). And “The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom, and whatever else you get, get insight” (4:7, NRSV).

While the author of Ecclesiastes had seen “righteous people who perish in their righteousness” and “wicked people who prolong their life in their evildoing” (Eccl. 7:15, NRSV), as well as “righteous people who are treated according to the conduct of the wicked” and “wicked people who are treated according to the conduct of the righteous” (Eccl. 8:14, NRSV), Proverbs declares that the world makes sense: “Whoever pursues righteousness and kindness will find life and honor” (Prov. 21:21, NRSV).

Interestingly, the author of Proverbs seems to be aware of the mismatch to which Ecclesiastes calls attention; he labels it an abomination! “One who justifies the wicked and one who condemns the righteous are both alike an abomination to the LORD” (Prov. 17:15, NRSV).

But the reaction of Ecclesiastes to this mismatch is simply a massive shrug: “This also is vanity. So I commend enjoyment, for there is nothing better for people under the sun than to eat, and drink, and enjoy themselves” (Eccl. 8:14-15, NRSV). (That is a very close parallel to 3:11-15, cited above as the author’s “motto.”)

Silencing the Questions?

Turning to modern applications in the church, it concerns me that those who ask questions are so readily silenced. In the narrative of his departure from Adventism, Dale Ratzlaff tells how he went to a trusted teacher for answers to his questions about Daniel 8:14. His question was: “What was ‘trampled’ in 457 B.C. that was ‘untrampled’ in 1844?”

Ratzlaff remembers the response as follows: “Suddenly his demeanor changed. He peered at me with a cold, penetrating, lengthy stare, with an expression I had never seen from him before. After a long, uncomfortable silence, he said: ‘Dale, aren’t you studying for the ministry? You should not be asking questions like that!’”⁴

Sometimes there are no good answers to satisfy us, but we must be free to ask our questions. Traditional perspectives often obscure that freedom. Job 13:15 provides a good illustration. The familiar rendering of this verse in the King James Version is deeply embedded in our souls: “Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him.” Modern translations capture a spunkier response to the divine presence: “See, he will kill me; I have no hope; but I will defend my ways to his face” (NRSV). And the book of Job tells us that God affirms those who dare to ask their bold questions. At the end of the book, God rebukes Job’s friends, who say all of the “nice” things about God: “My wrath is kindled against you and against your two friends; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has” (NRSV).

Affirming truth may not come easily. In his novel *Till We Have Faces*, C. S.

Lewis, that modern “skeptical” apologist for Christianity, expresses the haunting uncertainty that sometimes comes over the believer: “I say the gods deal very unrightly with us. For they will neither (which would be best of all) go away and leave us to live our own short days to ourselves, nor will they show themselves openly and tell us what they would have us do. For that too would be enduring. But to hint and hover, to draw near us in dreams and oracles, or in a waking vision that vanishes as soon as seen, to be dead silent when we question them and then glide back and whisper (words we cannot understand) in our ears when we most wish to be free of them, and to show to one what they hide from another; what is all this but cat-and-mouse play, blindman’s buff, and mere jugglery? Why must holy places be dark places?”⁵

Within a conservative believing community, such as Adventism, those with doubts are likely to be shouted down by those who have no doubts at all. But the presence of Ecclesiastes and Job in our Bibles should encourage us to nurture and encourage those with doubts. They are a precious part of our community. **AT**

¹ G. K. Chesterton, *St. Francis of Assisi* (1923), p. 96.

² George MacDonald, edited and with a preface by C. S. Lewis, *365 Readings* (1947), pp. 66-67 (#152).

³ Walter R. Martin, *The Truth About Seventh-day Adventists* (1960), p. 127 (note #11).

⁴ Dale Ratzlaff, *Truth Led Me Out* (2008), pp. 35-36.

⁵ C. S. Lewis, *Till We Have Faces: A Myth Retold* (1956), p. 249.