

“This book is well worth the wait. I recommend it to all who search for God, all who have found Him, and all who seek a deeper knowledge of Him.”

—**Jill Briscoe**, best-selling author, ministry leader,
and popular Bible teacher

“Intellectually satisfying and spiritually affirming, *Permission to Doubt* is a must-read for the skeptical mind and the emotionally weary. You will be led beyond answers to the ultimate prize of a solid faith you can bank on.”

—**Micca Campbell**, Proverbs 31 Ministry speaker and author,
An Untroubled Heart

“In *Permission to Doubt*, Ann provides compelling answers to many of the most significant questions related to mankind’s purpose and design. Her writing rises to a level warranted by the importance of those questions. It’s a challenging and rewarding read.”

—**Dr. Gene A. Getz**, president,
Center for Church Renewal, Plano, Texas

“Ann C. Sullivan’s success as a public orator stems from her wit, sincerity, wide range of knowledge, and genuine love of her audience. She now brings these same skills and experience to the writing of *Permission to Doubt*. This isn’t a textbook; it’s a visit with a woman who teaches, shares, and encourages.”

—**Dr. Dennis E. Hensley**, author, *Jesus in the 9 to 5*

“If you have ever doubted your faith, questioned a biblical principle, or wondered if there really is a God, read this book. In *Permission to Doubt*, Ann Sullivan dares to ask the hard questions while simultaneously revealing her own journey through doubt. This book is filled with relevant biblical truth, riveting illustrations, and transformational

principles. You probably already know five people who need this book. I highly recommend it.”

—**Carol Kent**, speaker and author,
Unquenchable: Grow a Wildfire Faith That Will Endure Anything

“People who think can’t help it. They simply need to ask the who, what, why, where, and how questions as they hear theories, ideas, and opinions along their journey of living their ordinary yet reflective and intensely personal lives. Formulas and religious mantras frustrate them like a ‘one size fits all’ garment or tool. It is for such Christian seekers and would-be followers of Christ that Ann Sullivan has shared her quest for a faith that satisfies. All the answers don’t come at once but are ultimately to be found in a confident and persistent search for the God of the Scriptures. This is truly a helpful book for those who are too honest to be satisfied by hollow bromides and platitudes, even those offered by well-meaning Christians. Read it. You will be glad you did.”

—**Jay Kesler**, president emeritus, Taylor University

“When doubt plagues us, we can believe that God has done something wrong to cause our skittish reaction. Privately, we back up and rarely admit that we are keeping God at arm’s length. The subject of doubt is not usually addressed in all its complexities. It needs to be, and Ann Sullivan has done it. In the process, she does not minimize its causes or its devastations. There is no way to read this without doing some valuable, Spirit-led, rugged introspection. No need to fear the journey, however. God’s Word is an anchor that holds anyone fast in the most severe storm of doubt. This book is a valuable resource and you can be sure I’ll be passing it along.”

—**Christine Wyrzten**, founder and director, Daughters of Promise

PERMISSION TO DOUBT

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One Woman's Journey *into a* Thinking Faith

Ann C. Sullivan

 Kregel
Publications

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For Sully

*Doubt is a pain too lonely to know
that faith is his twin brother.*

Khalil Gibran

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This book has been a long time in coming, as family and friends can attest. Several years ago, when two publishers approached me about writing, which is the natural next step for a speaker, I was thrilled. But I also knew I wasn't ready. Not only did I need more time to process life, I also needed to figure out why I so often agreed with the skeptics of my faith.

When it was finally time to take the plunge, I knew I needed to find unbiased people who could perform the delicate task of offering honest feedback without destroying me. Four editors were instrumental.

Tom Cox from Whitaker House began the first leg of the race by reminding me that he reads many manuscripts, and while it can get torturous at times, mine was a pleasure to review. Next to grab the baton was Mattie Wolfe of Crossway who took me to coffee and said, "You really have something special here. Don't give up." The third leg of the race brought me to the amazing Dennis E. "Doc" Hensley—professor, author, speaker, editor, encourager . . . I'll stop there, lest I run out of room. Finally, Diana Savage, another author, editor, techy, and immensely gifted woman, brought my manuscript to the doorstep of Kregel. Thank you for being my go-to girl! If at any point these editors questioned my abilities or wondered if I'd ever taken a language arts class in my life, they never said so.

My next good fortune was to meet my agent, Les Stobbe, whose keen insight, matched only by his stellar reputation and experience in the business, gave me the confidence every new writer sorely needs.

Laying the groundwork for all of this were several spiritual giants in my life. Dr. Jay Kesler and Dr. Stuart Briscoe exposed me to deep, rational thought and balanced theological and philosophical insights

with a vision that was never convoluted by extremism, legalism, or sentimentality. Both of them, along with my intensely gifted mentor, Jill Briscoe, encouraged me to grow and pursue truth in every way. I thank my parents for leading me to all of them.

None of this would have been possible, however, without one amazing internist. Dr. Tim McAvoy singlehandedly changed my life by diagnosing and treating a heart condition that had fueled a mysterious panic disorder I'd struggled with for more than a decade. His incredible insight, tempered only by his astonishing listening skills, made him the perfect doctor. Thus, he was instrumental in moving me from panic attacks to public speaking.

Thank you, family and friends. You know who you are. Thank you for loving me, supporting me, and leaving the words, "To whom much is given, much is required" ringing in my ears. It's my privilege to give back what was generously shared with me.

INTRODUCTION

Imagine having to stand up in front of hundreds of women to give a talk on “Confident Living” while struggling with serious doubt. Such was the task I faced several years ago, and as I sat at my desk poring over my notes, overwhelmed by inadequacy, I remember thinking, *Who am I to talk about confidence?*

Then it hit me: *Who better?* Who would I rather listen to address the issue of assurance: someone who has never struggled with it, or someone who has had to claw her way through a maze to find it? Don’t try to sell me exercise equipment a twenty-two-year-old airbrushed model is using. Show me a middle-aged mother of four who’s successfully fighting gravity, and then I’ll listen.

Doubt and I go way back. We have a long history together, and our struggle has been fierce. As a speaker, though, I have doubt to thank for uniquely equipping me to address this topic. I speak to women across the country whose struggle with doubt is as real as mine was and who are relieved finally to come clean. I remind them that while doubt terrifies us in a way nothing else can, it need not signal the end of faith. Sometimes it’s just the beginning. So let’s give ourselves permission to doubt.



PART ONE

DOUBTS,
DRY SPELLS,
AND THE
REDISCOVERY
OF FAITH

Truth never lost ground by enquiry.

William Penn

Chapter 1

DEFINING TRUTH

On a college campus, years ago, I made the frigid January trek back to my dorm room. As I stepped inside, I felt lightheaded with the sensation that a weight was pulling me down. My pulse raced, my breathing became labored, and sheer terror coursed through me.

I was nineteen, and up to that point had been coasting through life quite comfortably. Although in retrospect I realize there had been signs, it wasn't until that moment of terror I finally realized I had a problem.

The panic attacks increased in both frequency and intensity, and within a month I was crippled by a full-fledged panic disorder that I would attempt to conceal for more than a decade. Doctors were at a loss to dig up a source, and counselors were baffled. I didn't fit the mold. I was healthy and well-adjusted and had grown up completely untouched by divorce and dysfunction. I was also a Christian, and there was the rub.

People doubt. Christians doubt too. We question things that at one time seemed so deeply embedded in our belief system, we were sure nothing could shake them. But life happens, circumstances change, and suddenly the honeymoon with Jesus comes to an end. Our confidence wavers as depression and despair press in, choking the faith right out of us. *How could a good God allow this kind of pain? Didn't I pray enough? Didn't I believe enough? Maybe I was wrong.*

Some of us experience doubt because our pain no longer fits our understanding of God; others because our theology no longer accommodates our choices. Throw in some disillusionment and a touch of confusion, and the ground becomes fertile for questioning faith. Regardless of its cause, however, one fact remains: doubt always hurts.

All my life I heard well-intentioned people quote the Bible and say that Christians are called to be joyful (1 Thess. 5:16), to live by faith (2 Cor. 5:7), and to be anxious for nothing (Phil. 4:6). Yet, with each terrifying panic attack it became clear to me how short I fell as a believer. I became plagued with fear and anxiety and was forced to endure the kind of oppressive silence that comes when the answers won't. More than once I pleaded for my sanity with a God I hoped was there. *If you're really there, please, just don't let me lose my mind.*

Questions began to roll through me as though I'd never really thought about anything before. Why was I suffering? Where was God in all this? Did He even exist? Didn't He care? Years later, as I began traveling across the country as a speaker, I realized that these are the kinds of questions everyone asks, particularly when they're struggling. Adversity has a way of catapulting us into an exploration of our faith, and while I encourage the investigation *before* the bottom drops out, I do hear a collective sigh of relief whenever I speak on doubt and people discover they're not alone. Giving them permission to doubt, validate their pain, and articulate their struggle always brings a measure of comfort. Thinking and asking questions is a good thing, but challenging a belief system isn't easy. It's risky and may force us to move outside the comfortable spaces we've set up for ourselves. And who knows what we'll find there?

From the first day of my panic disorder, doubt began chipping away at my faith and set me on a course I would never have chosen for myself. But from where I stand today as a communicator and teacher, I can't think of better training. Nothing could have prepared me more than picking apart what I knew as truth and discovering for myself what was

really worth clinging to and what wasn't. My journey enabled me to understand a woman's fear and look her straight in the eye and say, "I know exactly how you feel and it's okay to feel that way."

Thirteen years and many doctors and counselors later, I was finally diagnosed and treated for a heart condition that released uncontrolled adrenaline into my system, fueling my panic attacks. Through one amazing doctor, I discovered a physical cause to my psychological fallout. This solution, however, did not surface one second before God decided it was time, and with 20/20 hindsight, it's easy to see why. It took a long time for me to figure out what God was up to in my life and what He was preparing me for. Of the two kinds of speakers—those who have something to say and those who have to say something—He made sure I was the former. My battle left me with two unwavering convictions. First, there are different kinds of doubt, and each one calls for its own unique response. Second, doubt does not necessarily signal the end of faith; sometimes it is just the beginning—the perfect opportunity for faith to be strengthened.

The Truth About Truth

Stephen Board of InterVarsity Press and author of the book *Doubt* made a statement many years ago that proved to be true not only in my own life but also in the lives of the women I speak to. He said those who've never really doubted have never really believed. He's known many Christians, himself included, whose deepest convictions have grown out of personal struggle with serious doubt.

Currently, we have an entire generation of Christians who have grown up in the church, as I did, and would technically classify themselves as "believers," but are now staying away in droves. There are myriad reasons for this, not the least of which is their inability to find relevancy and answers to the issues they face in the real world. Also, our society is pluralistic, accepting all beliefs as true. Why should Christians think they have an edge on the truth?

What I've discovered about genuine truth, though, is that by its own definition, it isn't relativistic. It isn't threatened by our questions and doubts, nor is it determined by culture, opinion, the size of a church building, or evangelistic programs. Its essence doesn't change. How truth is packaged, delivered, and received, however, must keep evolving, no matter how difficult we find change. Many of us have become skeptical of organized religion in general, and have found religious people pushy, stodgy, judgmental, and homophobic. But let's not confuse our distaste for certain people, styles, or out-of-date subcultures with the essence of genuine truth. What is it we *really* object to?

Neglecting to separate the issues would be a little like me talking about my grade school math teacher who emitted a strange odor. Asking for help with an equation became painful in more ways than one. So I made a decision right then and there that I would never study mathematics.

If we're honest we'll admit that often our gripe is with Christians and what they've done in the name of Christ, rather than with Christ Himself. It's hard to argue with those whose commitment to Jesus is displayed by feeding the hungry, battling human trafficking, or rescuing the planet. Granted, Jesus asks believers to be set apart and to make a difference, but He certainly doesn't ask it of unbelievers and He makes it very clear that our primary objective is always love: "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35). Love is a truth that has no variance over time.

But some applications of truth do change and absolutely must. Professor of philosophy J. L. Schellenberg, in his latest offering entitled *Evolutionary Religion*, is right in this respect. The practice of religion evolves along with people and their unique cultures. However, ultimate truth, something Schellenberg tends to deny, does not change, whether people embrace science and reason or prefer superstition. Truth is not impacted by us. We are impacted by truth.

Dr. Bradley Wright, in his book *Christians Are Hate-Filled Hypocrites . . . and Other Lies You've been Told*, calls attention to the fact

that societies change, and if the church wants to thrive in any culture, it must clear away the clutter of older cultures and adapt to where things are now. Issues like technology, places of worship, and even changes in the average marrying age can and should affect how the church functions and remains relevant. The only constant is the God they seek.

We see instances of change regularly. There was a time when the word *fundamentalist* was a positive term, referring to those who embraced fundamental truths about a particular concept. Now it's tantamount to fanatics and suicide bombers. Today, we may be put off by the term *devil* because it sounds trite and medieval. But unless we sidestep it, or blame it on a selfish gene, we're forced to confront the fallout of evil every day of our lives. The ultimate truth of the existence of evil is undeniable.

Asking the Right Questions

Questioning a belief system we have been handed isn't a bad thing. Not only can genuine truth stand up to our doubt, but questions are an integral part of growth. They help clear through the clutter of misinformation and preconceived notions that we so quickly create and draw us back to what's most important—God and the real truth He provides. How many of us have been derailed from our pursuit of genuine truth by prejudice, bias, or personal preference?

But growing pains are not called such for nothing. A book such as Reza Aslan's *The Zealot* has sold well, not because he claimed credentials that were later questioned but because as a culture we are exhausted by the fallout of intolerance. Relativism's laid-back approach to truth may not be intellectually satisfying, but it feels like a desperately needed breath of fresh air—a release from the bondage of strict rules that are no longer relevant. However, before we throw the proverbial baby out with the bathwater, we better ask a few more questions. The stakes are high.

The apostle Paul wasn't the most dynamic preacher of his day. He wasn't like the televangelists we're used to, with their bleached white teeth and bad comb-overs. He wasn't particularly tactful either, but he was passionate. He consistently encouraged people to think outside their comfort zone and ask questions. He instructed the church in Thessalonica to test everything (1 Thess. 5:21). Like separating wheat from chaff, truth will prevail and become strengthened in the one who does the honest asking. The apostle commended the Bereans in Acts 17:11 for their investigative skills. To the Colossians he said, "See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ" (Col. 2:8).

There's always been a current of truth flowing through humanity causing us to ask the big questions. Why are we here? Is there a God? Is He detached or is He engaged? Does God move us only like we might be moved by a beautiful piece of art, as Aristotle contended? Or is He Calvin's God, ruling the individual parts of the world by a providential hand?

Paul is encouraging us to keep our minds engaged and ask the questions that confront us. It's good to stretch ourselves and ponder the big questions, even the ones we can't answer, because whether our perspectives are eternal or temporal, getting truth right is too important to who we are to settle for being half true.

There are questions we may discover answers to as well, if we'll simply ask. Today's emerging church, which asks how to "do church" in postmodern culture, has become an essential part of the healthy dialogue, but not without making a few people uneasy in the process. Comfortable complacency can be much easier to live with than facing divided opinion.

Dr. Scot McKnight is an insightful New Testament scholar and historian who regularly challenges believers to think outside the box, even with regard to something as basic as how we approach the Scriptures.

In his book, *The Blue Parakeet: Rethinking How You Read the Bible*, McKnight dares to suggest that whether we're aware of it or not, we all do our fair share of "picking and choosing" when it comes to interpreting and applying what we read. He does a good job of encouraging believers to carefully separate negotiables from nonnegotiables.

History teaches us that while people and opinions come and go—along with values, societies, trends, and traditions—truth will stand forever, keeping a person rooted, less likely to be "tossed back and forth" (Eph. 4:14). All humans, including those of us in the church, tend to be uncomfortable with change. There was a time when the church was quite opposed to a heliocentric position, convinced that the sun rotated around the earth; are there areas where the church is once again blocking beneficial change because it fears the unknown? McKnight, along with many other church leaders of today, would encourage us to consider the possibility that changes may be necessary. And I agree. If the questions that accompany doubt and skepticism can usher in the kind of investigation that allows faith to flourish in truth, they have done their job.

Because They Said So

Years ago, apologist Paul Little told an amusing story about a Sunday school teacher who asked his class, "What is faith?" A little boy raised his hand and said, "Faith is believing in something you know is not true." This story, though mildly amusing at first, becomes considerably less so as we begin to struggle with doubt. We become the little boy in the story and wonder what our faith is really built on. Is it wishful thinking? Is it self-deception? We may begin to wonder why we ever believed in the first place.

Growing up in a Christian home had been a blessing and a comfort up to the point of my first struggle with doubt. Suddenly, it seemed more of a liability. What were the odds, I wondered, that of all the places in the world I could have been born, I just happened to be born

into a home that had an edge on the truth? Was I one of the chosen few? Had God rejected the rest, as some held? I wasn't sure I was interested in a God who would create an entire race of people and cast the majority of them into hell.

As a university student away from home for the first time, exploring other cultures and beliefs, my faith began feeling dangerously inadequate, narrow-minded, and naïve. It wasn't as though I wanted it that way. I wasn't looking to make waves or get into heated debates like some of my classmates and philosophy professors. But I didn't want to delude myself either, pinning my hopes on something that wasn't real. I was hungry for truth and I needed answers, though I would have given anything not to have the questions in the first place.

I remember visiting my mother-in-law one afternoon soon after I graduated from college. I was still troubled by my doubts and looking for some kind of comfort, so I decided to broach the subject with her. She was an extraordinary person who was blessed with a cheery disposition and rarely complained . . . though, from where I stood, I could have pointed out to her lots of reasons she could. She had grown up in her faith, was reared in parochial school, and rarely missed church. On that particular day, as my secret storm raged within me, I asked her if she ever questioned her faith. I watched for her reaction as she stood folding laundry still warm from the dryer. She paused, looked at me, and said, "No . . . never. We were taught not to ask questions." Then, she resumed her chore contentedly as I sat in amazement, wondering why I couldn't be more like her. Why was I tortured with so many questions? Why couldn't I be satisfied with someone else doing my thinking for me?

Most of us spend the first decade of our lives believing everything our parents tell us. Up to that point, we typically trust them and take what they say at face value. In the second decade, things tend to change dramatically. Not only do we begin to challenge what our parents tell us, but we sometimes wonder if they've ever had a clue. It's almost a rite

of passage, I think to myself, every time I remind my kids how cool I was before they came along.

According to child psychologists, the eventuality of separating is viewed not only as normal but as a healthy sign of developing independence. The process of separating from our parents, at least on some levels, and learning to think for ourselves are essential parts of growing up. Exactly when this happens, however, will be as different as the children themselves.

I was closing in on twenty when it happened to me. My older sister had been about eight. She trusted our parents and loved them too, but from a very early age she was an independent thinker. If something didn't make sense to her, she questioned it. I, on the other hand, the one born with the "tell me I'm good" sign taped to my back, found disagreeing with our parents unthinkable. This kind of child may make for easy parenting, but compliant acceptance can set up all sorts of future challenges for both parent and child.

I was nineteen when my sister walked into my room and asked why I was crying. When I told her my dad had said some things I didn't agree with, she looked at me knowingly and asked, "Has it ever occurred to you that Dad might actually be wrong?" I stood there, realizing for the first time that no, it had not. I pondered for a few moments this strange new concept to which my sister was introducing me. It felt a bit disquieting at first but strangely liberating.

Whether we are aware of it or not, every one of us is a product of our parents and upbringing. We are a product of our environment, our siblings, and our playground experiences. Experts have long held the position that both nature and nurture play integral roles in our development and impact every aspect of our lives, including our ability to trust.

This is so important that whenever I'm speaking on challenging life topics such as contentment, discernment, self-control, or self-image, I'm extremely careful to point out that we don't come to the table on equal footing. The ground may be level at the foot of the cross, as the old

evangelical saying goes, because we all fall short of God's glory. It's level, because no matter how great or small our infraction, His grace covers it all. However, while "salvation" is equally available to everyone, not everyone has the same opportunities to understand or experience life in the same way.

Each one of us is different and will struggle with different things. Having two kids showed me that. My son came out of the womb with his little scrunched face asking, "How can I please you, Mommy?" My daughter came out asking, "Who's in charge here?" Matt seemed relaxed, wrapped up tight in his newborn blanket, but Lissy was on edge and almost too alert from her very first breath. We'd soon realize that her gigantic blue eyes weren't simply looking around the nursery . . . they were casing the joint. As I've watched my kids grow, I've recognized how the different dispositions they were assigned at birth have impacted every aspect of their lives. Their natural tendencies are powerful forces of nature and have become a crucial part of their personal equation. This in turn impacts everything about them, including how they approach, process, and challenge truth.

Nurture is just as important as nature, however. I was reared by two great parents who could not have been more different, and those differences made for quite the adventure. When life got tough, my mom, the eternal optimist, would say things like, "Do your best and pray about it. It will all work out." And, essentially, she was right. My dad, on the other hand, who'd like to think he's just as positive as my mom, was instead the ultimate pragmatist . . . which is code for Debbie Downer. In order to equip me to meet life's harsh realities, he was known to whisper things more like, "If you're ever destitute, homeless, and sleeping on a park bench . . . just remember, newspaper is excellent insulation."

It took me a long time to realize that these two factions were forever waging war in my head. Even now, I catch myself bracing for disaster and straining to hear the other shoe drop, believing the adage that if everything is going your way, you're probably driving in the wrong

lane. I've never understood people who look into the news camera after some tragedy and say, "I never thought this could happen to me." I've wondered if I'll be the first to say, "I knew this was going to happen." Yet, along with all this pessimism is a strong vein of optimism. In fact, I'll have just as many moments where I'm so optimistic I frighten myself.

No matter what your upbringing, at some point we have to come to terms with our DNA, our parents, our experiences, and any other truth claims that may be at war within us. I know my parents did their best, and I've benefited from their differences, learning to temper faith with reason. I have them and my kids to thank for teaching me that our propensity to doubt and question can be as woven into our fabric as the color of our eyes. I call it the DNA of doubting. We may live an entire lifetime with a *Lord, I believe; help me in my unbelief*¹ disposition simply because our bent is to wonder if anything can be true. One minute logic tells us God is there, the next minute we're not even sure if *we* are there. I've learned that in those moments, it may have to come down to taking the risk of examining the evidence and weighing our options.

In his book, *Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus*, Dr. Nabeel Qureshi, a former devout Muslim, tells of his search for spiritual truth. Through his research and historical reasoning, he came to realize that the claims of Christ were much different from what he'd been led to believe. He now travels the world lecturing and encouraging people to investigate all the evidence and understand for themselves the differences between Jesus, Muhammad, and all the others. And though the truth has set him free, Qureshi paid a steep price by alienating a family he deeply loves. Only recently have those broken bridges begun to be rebuilt.

As I began to investigate the claims of Christ and tried to separate fact from fiction, I too knew it might lead me away from the beliefs of my youth. There are lots of things we hear growing up that should probably be given a second thought. Many of them are pretty innocuous. Turns out you won't catch a cold from simply stepping outside

with a wet head. Crossing your eyes won't make them stick that way. Swimming less than an hour after eating won't make you drown.

None of these are very significant in and of themselves, but they do illustrate that not everything our parents, teachers, or pastors tell us is genuine truth. And though I don't think most of them set out to lie, they are human and, as such, are open to making mistakes. I was pretty sure my family wouldn't disown me for questioning the faith I grew up with, but I needed to brace myself, not knowing if my discoveries would prove them wrong. I knew it could be painful to disagree with them, but I also knew I'd never find comfort living on autopilot.

With that in mind let's give ourselves permission to doubt because questions are not just a good thing; they are essential to uncovering genuine truth. When it comes to dealing with doubt effectively, understanding who we are and where we're coming from is half the battle. The other half involves understanding the nature of doubt and how it attaches itself to us. When we've done that, we're ready to chart a course toward becoming who we were intended to be. So, ask away. And rest assured, truth won't break under the bright lights of interrogation.

Looking Deeper

1. How do you define truth?
2. Who has had the greatest impact—positively and negatively—on your ability to trust?
3. What events most shaped your faith?