



STUDY GUIDE



THE DECONSTRUCTION OF CHRISTIANITY

SIX SESSIONS ON UNDERSTANDING
AND RESPONDING TO THE FAITH
DECONSTRUCTION MOVEMENT



ALISA CHILDERS
AND **TIM BARNETT**
WITH NANCY TAYLOR

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STUDY GUIDE



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The Deconstruction of Christianity Study Guide: Six Sessions on Understanding and Responding to the Faith Deconstruction Movement

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A Note from Alisa Childers and Tim Barnett

Deconstruction is sweeping through an entire culture. To many involved in the deconstruction explosion, it doesn't matter where you land, as long as you leave historic Christianity. Some who leave the faith have been deeply wounded by the church. Others feel repressed and harmed by the moral imperatives found in Scripture. For some, deconstruction leads to a self-styled spirituality. For others, it leads to agnosticism, atheism, the occult, or humanism. Still others retain some elements of the faith but no longer view the Bible as a trustworthy guide for life and spiritual practice. What do all these different destinations have in common? The authority of God and his Word are traded for the authority of the self.

Maybe you have a loved one who is deconstructing their faith, and you are struggling to know how to respond. Maybe you are trying to understand the radical spiritual makeover your friend or family member is going through. Maybe your relationship with them has been strained or even cut off because of your "toxic" Christian beliefs. If so, you are exactly who we hope to help with this study.

This study guide and *The Deconstruction of Christianity DVD Experience* have been created as companions to our book. Adapting material from *The Deconstruction of Christianity*, Nancy Taylor and the team at Tyndale have put together a fabulous resource that will facilitate small group discussions. Over the next six weeks, *The Deconstruction of Christianity Study Guide* will help you grow in your understanding of deconstruction so you are better equipped to respond with truth and compassion to those in your life who are going through it.

Alisa and Tim

Introduction

If it hasn't happened to you yet, soon enough it will. One of your friends, a family member, or someone from your church will declare that they no longer believe key doctrines of the Christian faith. They will leave the church and claim that they feel a new sense of freedom. The ground will shift. You will wonder what's going on—not just with them, but with the whole Christian world you've been part of for years.

Sometimes this shift happens gradually. Maybe your loved one starts voicing some questions here and there and isn't satisfied by the biblical answers they're getting. It's a little tremor in the ground. Then a fault line opens up. The answers they seem to embrace are further and further outside the Christian fold. And eventually they post something with the hashtag #exvangelical. A seismic shift has occurred, and the landscape has changed.

Other times the deconstruction seems to be an abrupt and radical divorce from their faith. You've likely seen one or more high-profile influencers in Christian circles post something that begins with words like “This may come as a shock

to you, but it's been a long time coming. I'm leaving the church. It doesn't serve me anymore."

These are the faces of deconstructionism. The stories are varied, but they share common themes, and all too often they share a common ending: deconversion. People are leaving their faith behind.

Or maybe you're the one who has been struggling through questions and doubts, and you can't decide if you're going crazy or if you're finally uncovering the truth. You thought you had your faith figured out, but now you're not so sure. And you don't know what to call the phase of doubt you're in, let alone where it's headed.

LOOKING FOR ANSWERS IN ALL THE RIGHT PLACES

We all know you and I can't save people. Only God can do that. But that doesn't mean we are helpless. There is hope for those who are deconstructing their faith. Our faith is built on a solid foundation. There are good answers to the questions people are wrestling with, and there are winsome ways to communicate them.

This study guide aims to lead you on a journey of understanding. First, we'll seek to understand what deconstruction is. Then we'll look at the reasons people are deconstructing. There is a path they often follow. We'll aim to understand the cultural forces at work behind this epidemic as well as the personal crises that contribute to deconstruction. And finally, we'll look at practical ways we can help those who are deconstructing their faith.

This study is designed to be done in community, alongside

other people who are trying to understand what's behind the deconstruction of Christianity and what we can do about it. When we listen to others, we gain perspective on both the questions and the answers. And we know that we're not alone—other people are there to share our challenges, listen to our grief over loved ones who are struggling, and celebrate when we have a moment of understanding. Together we can map a path forward for our own faith and the advance of the Kingdom of God.

TIPS FOR PARTICIPANTS

One word of advice: As with anything in life, you'll get out of this study what you put into it. If you gather each week, watch the video, and have a discussion, you'll learn a little something. Your time will have been well spent. But you won't have gotten everything out of the experience that you could have. If you prepare ahead of time by reading the assigned chapters in *The Deconstruction of Christianity* and then answer the reflection questions after your meeting, you'll gain far more understanding, insight, and resources for thinking through deconstruction. If this is worth doing, it's worth doing well.

To gain the most from this study, you should set aside two or three hours per week for preparation. You can either answer the reflection questions from the previous session and then read the next session's chapters in one sitting or break it up into two or three blocks of time. The time you put into this study will pay dividends in your own faith journey as

well as in your relationships with fellow believers who may ask you questions about faith.

When you meet as a group, come ready to share. Your group will succeed or fail based on how open people are willing to be. Come with your honest questions, come ready to listen with an open mind and heart, and be vulnerable with fellow group members. If you have a question or concern, someone else in the group probably does too. Your gracious responses to one another will create an atmosphere where understanding can grow and flourish.

But don't overshare. Your group needs to be a safe place for everyone, and that means you need to hold confidences. Don't gossip or slander people. It's enough to reveal broad strokes of things you've seen or experienced—people don't need to know all your concerns about your wayward child or the church across town that your brother-in-law's aunt heard something about. And while we're on the topic of oversharing, remember to leave time and space for the introverts in your midst to speak up.

General good group manners also say that you should arrive on time and attend every week that you possibly can. It's a way of respecting others. When one person is late or absent, the whole group misses out.

HOW THIS STUDY WORKS

There are six sessions in this study, corresponding with chapters from *The Deconstruction of Christianity* by Alisa Childers and Tim Barnett, and enhanced by their video teaching. Each session has the following sections:

- A few introductory paragraphs to set the stage for what the session is all about.
- **Leader's Note:** This brief paragraph suggests goals for the discussion time.
- **Read:** These are the chapters from *The Deconstruction of Christianity* that participants should read before the next meeting.
- **Watch:** This section spells out the points you should be listening for in the video teaching session.
- **Discuss:** These questions will aid group discussion. They are designed to go along with the chapters you read, but even participants who haven't read the chapters ahead of time should be able to join a meaningful discussion around them. Each session includes at least one passage from the New Living Translation of the Bible, which we've printed for you right in the book. All you really need to bring each week is this study guide and your copy of *The Deconstruction of Christianity*, but if you want to bring a Bible or read from a different translation, that's fine too.
- Key quotes taken directly from *The Deconstruction of Christianity* are interspersed throughout the text to remind you of what you've read. You may want to read some of them aloud during your small group time to add richness and depth to the discussion.
- **Pray:** Both suggestions for prayer time and a written prayer are offered, so you can use either to close if you wish. Ideally, you'll leave some time to share prayer

requests so group members can be supported in prayer as you journey together through this study.

- **Reflect:** These questions will help you reflect on what you discussed and what it means for you personally. Don't skip over these sections; they will help you process your own faith journey as well as understand the journeys other people might be on.
- **Take Action:** Each week we'll work on one helpful action step you can use as you engage with people who are deconstructing.
- **Prepare:** Think about these questions as you read the assigned chapters for your next session. They will help you know where you're headed and what to look for as you read.

TIPS FOR LEADERS

If you're reading this section, it's likely that you've either signed up to lead a group through *The Deconstruction of Christianity*, or you're thinking about doing so. That's great! Your willingness to serve and lead in this way will help others who are concerned about the deconstruction explosion and will bolster your own faith and your understanding of this cultural phenomenon.

We've done everything we can to make your job as easy as possible. As long as you are willing to spend a few hours reading through the chapters ahead of time, can start the video, and then are able to keep the discussion moving through the questions, you're perfectly qualified to be a leader. Here are a few tips and tricks:

1. **Come prepared.** It probably goes without saying, but you need to set the example by spending the time to read and underline the pertinent chapters of *The Deconstruction of Christianity* so you can lead a meaningful discussion. You should be the most prepared person in the room, able to point to pages in the book that are relevant to what's being discussed and answer a question if the group gets stuck. It would be best if you read the entire book before the first meeting, and then reread the assigned chapters for each week along with the rest of your group. Be sure you also spend some time on the reflection questions after each session. Your preparation time will help enhance the group's study and yield additional insights that everyone can benefit from.
2. **Select key questions before you meet—but remain flexible.** If you're concerned that you won't have time to cover everything, decide ahead of time which questions in the Discuss and Reflect sections you want to be sure to touch on, either because they seem particularly relevant to your group or you think they will spark spirited dialogue. Of course, if members of your group want to discuss a different question or you find the conversation around one question is particularly fruitful, you can change course during the session.
3. **Be honest.** If you're not willing to be vulnerable in answering questions, chances are good that no one else will be either. There is no shame in having

doubts or questions—that’s how we mature in our faith.

4. **Admit when you don’t have an answer.** Some of these issues are complex, and no one expects you to be a Bible scholar. If you don’t know something, maybe someone else in the group will. But it’s okay—and a sign of good leadership—to say, “I don’t know; let me find out for next week.” Or even better, “Let’s all see if we can find the answer to that for next week.” There are many resources available to help you answer any questions your group may have.
5. **Keep the discussion on track.** There is nothing more frustrating for group members than to have group time wasted running down a rabbit trail. And the topics covered in *The Deconstruction of Christianity* offer a lot of opportunity for tangential discussion. Have some sentences ready for these moments: “That’s a great point, and I’d love to keep discussing it, but maybe we can table that until after the meeting so we can get through all these questions.”
6. **Don’t let one person dominate the discussion.** As we all know, the world is made up of introverts and extroverts, and both types of people have wise words to offer in a discussion. However, extroverts don’t always notice when they’re talking too much, and introverts sometimes wait for a long silence before they are ready to speak. Make space for all personalities to share, but don’t force people to share beyond their comfort level.

7. **Pray.** This is the best thing you can do for your group. Throughout the study the group is encouraged to keep a prayer list of people who are deconstructing their faith. This list, and any other requests shared, should be kept confidential. If everyone in your group is comfortable with it, you can send a weekly email of names and prayer requests to encourage one another to pray regularly. In addition, pray at the end of the meeting, reminding people that ultimately the best place to go with our questions and heartache is to the throne of God.

SESSION I

WHAT IS DECONSTRUCTIONISM?

Understanding What It Is and Why It Matters

If you follow Christian media at all, it's nearly impossible to go on Instagram, Twitter, or your news feed and not see the story of someone who claims the label #exvangelical or says they are deconstructing. There is an explosion of doubt and an implosion of faith, and it's happening among our own. These aren't outsiders looking in, but rather the inner circle of pastors, church leaders, and celebrity Christians. And it hits closer to home as well—these are our children, our friends, our spouses. Everywhere we look, people are questioning the faith we once shared, and they are doing it in angry tones and sarcastic memes.

What can we do?

First, we need to listen and understand. We need to

see where these people are coming from, what they are really saying, and how we got to this point in culture and in Christianity. We need to peel back the layers and get at the core of deconstruction. It's impossible to argue against what we don't first understand. And that's what this study is all about. Together, we'll answer the main questions people have about deconstructionism:

- What does the word *deconstruction* mean?
- Why does it matter to the church?
- How did we get here—what's the history of deconstruction, and why is it suddenly so popular?
- Why do people deconstruct their faith?
- What exactly is being deconstructed?
- Who are the deconstructors?
- Where do we go from here—what comes next?

This isn't an academic exercise, though we hope you will engage your mind with new ideas and come away with greater understanding. This is personal. It's coming to your church, your neighborhood, and your dinner table. It's threatening relationships you hold dear. If you haven't personally been affected by faith deconstruction yet, you will be. So it's important to be prepared for the moment when your child or even your pastor identifies as an #exvangelical.

Maybe this sounds scary, as if a whole new threat to our faith has emerged. But as the Bible reminds us, we should not fear. There is hope. There is objective truth. There are answers. And there are helpful, constructive actions you can take to be a speaker of truth and an agent of change.

Throughout this study we've included an action step in each session that will give you practical tools and helpful advice for engaging with those who are deconstructing. The final session will bring all these ideas together. We will get to some answers.

But first, let's define our terms and make sure we're asking the right questions.

LEADER'S NOTE

Your main goals this week are to get group members comfortable with one another, encourage them to begin telling their stories about how deconstruction has affected them, and quell any fears they may have that having honest doubts means they are deconstructing their faith. Begin by learning each other's names. You might ask participants to answer an icebreaker question or share why they joined this study. This is a very personal topic for many as they watch their children, friends, or spouses abandon their faith. You want to establish rapport so people feel this is a safe place to explore the tenets of Christianity and share their grief over loved ones who might be deconstructing. If it seems helpful, you could also briefly touch on the tips for participants on pages 5–6.

READ

Before your meeting, read the introductory pieces and chapters 1 and 2 (“Explosion” and “Exvangelical”) in *The Deconstruction of Christianity*.

strained, and sometimes they are broken beyond repair. We need to have something to bolster our own faith even as we make space for the honest questions and doubts Christians have about their faith. And we need better answers. Most importantly, we need to understand what's really going on and what's at stake.

The weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ.

2 CORINTHIANS 10:4-5, ESV

The fundamental nature of spiritual warfare is not power encounters; it's truth encounters.¹ It's a battle of ideas.

The Deconstruction of Christianity, page 10

3. Based on 2 Corinthians 10:4-5, how would you define spiritual warfare? How does the battle of ideas fit into your understanding of spiritual warfare?

Read Ephesians 6:10-20:

A final word: Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on all of God's armor so that you will be able to stand firm against all strategies of the devil. For we are not fighting against flesh-and-blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places.

Therefore, put on every piece of God's armor so you will be able to resist the enemy in the time of evil. Then after the battle you will still be standing firm. Stand your ground, putting on the belt of truth and the body armor of God's righteousness. For shoes, put on the peace that comes from the Good News so that you will be fully prepared. In addition to all of these, hold up the shield of faith to stop the fiery arrows of the devil. Put on salvation as your helmet, and take the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

Pray in the Spirit at all times and on every occasion. Stay alert and be persistent in your prayers for all believers everywhere.

And pray for me, too. Ask God to give me the right words so I can boldly explain God's mysterious plan that the Good News is for Jews and Gentiles alike. I am in chains now, still preaching this message as God's ambassador. So pray that I will keep on speaking boldly for him, as I should.

4. What does Ephesians 6 add to your understanding of spiritual warfare?

5. How can we engage in the battle for truth in the arena of ideas, using the armor of God? What weapons are particularly necessary when we are dealing with deconstruction?

We all have questions. In fact, part of growing in our faith requires asking questions of God, the Bible, and ourselves. It can be scary to admit what we don't know, and that is why some people shy away from it, but throughout Scripture we see examples of godly men and women asking hard questions. God can handle it. He knows that this is how we grow in our relationship with him. So where is the line between healthy curiosity and a quest for truth versus deconstruction and deconversion? Let's explore that a little bit.

- i. Miracles can't happen. When you see those in the Bible, they can either be explained as natural phenomena or are exaggerations.
 - j. Some things in the Bible might not be literally true, but they are still meaningful and real.
8. People in the Bible asked some of the questions listed above, and they were not reprimanded for it. Clearly it's okay to have questions and wrestle through things. What is the difference between asking a difficult question and deconstruction? If you imagine a spectrum between honest doubts and questions versus deconversion, where would you say your questions fall? Draw an X on the line below to mark the spot.

Honest doubt

Deconversion

Asking your hard questions, correcting your false beliefs, and facing your deepest doubts are all a natural part of maturing as a Christian.

9. Do you think there is a good kind of deconstruction? If so, what does it entail? What would characterize bad deconstruction?

Deconstruction, as culture defines it, is at odds with Christianity. It is not about correct theology; it is about rejection of the authority of the Bible. It is not about arriving at objective truth but rather about living your own “truth.” And it is not based on any external authority but rather is defined solely by the self.

Deconstruction is not about getting your theology right. It's not about trying to make your views match reality. It's about tearing down doctrines that are morally wrong to you to make them match your own internal conscience, moral compass, true authentic self, or whatever else it's being called these days.

The Deconstruction of Christianity, page 25

Alisa and Tim came to the conclusion that the word *deconstruction* should not be used to describe a healthy process because (1) culture defines the word as a rejection of Scripture as an objective standard of truth, so using the word another way comes across to the deconstruction community

as deceptive; (2) it is cringey, awkward, and confusing when we sacrifice clarity in an attempt to be relevant; and (3) the philosophical baggage of the word *deconstruction* is too great to overcome. For these reasons, we will move forward in this study of deconstruction drawing a firm line between doubt and deconstruction.

If you are asking honest questions in good faith, with the Bible as your standard for truth and with a desire to know God better, you are not deconstructing. You may have doubts; that is normal—even people in the Bible expressed doubt, and they were not criticized for it. You may be trying to separate things you were taught about Christianity that are primarily cultural from what the Bible actually says. That’s a good thing. Living out the life of faith with honesty and integrity involves asking some hard questions and growing in our understanding of God and his Word.

What separates a doubter from a deconstructionist is their view of Scripture. Do you believe that God’s Word is an authoritative and objective standard of truth? Do you at least seek to discover if the Bible is reliable and authoritative? If so, your questions will help you reconstruct on the bedrock of truth. This study will help you understand your faith better and respond well to the arguments of deconstructionists.

Faith deconstruction is a postmodern process of rethinking your faith without regarding Scripture as a standard.

When we use the word deconstructionist, we are talking specifically about the most influential voices online who are actively attempting to dismantle historic Christianity, discredit the church, and promote an atmosphere of faith deconstruction.

The Deconstruction of Christianity, page 27

10. Chapter 2 opens with some #exvangelical quotes, including these:

- “A god that requires belief in it in order to avoid eternal punishment while also not providing evidence of its existence is not a loving god.” #exvangelical²
- “I’m not going to derive my cosmology from four-thousand-year-old legends of a jealous, bloodthirsty demigod.” #exvangelical³
- “In abusive relationships, one person convinces another person that they are worthless and no one else could ever love them. That’s why people stay. This is also how the church operates.” #exvangelical⁴

What similar quotes, statements, or sentiments have you encountered? What generalizations and assumptions are people who say these things making about evangelical Christianity? What do you think is the goal of those making these statements?

The one thing virtually all deconstruction stories have in common is what they say they are leaving behind.

The Deconstruction of Christianity, page 30

11. What are common beliefs about what *evangelical* means? What do you think it means?

People define *evangelical* in somewhat varied ways, but there are some common themes, and it is these core doctrines that those who are deconstructing reject. Deconstructionist Blake Chastain has written that exvangelicals are leaving behind

- a literal reading of the Bible,
- a belief that women are to be submissive to men,
- a belief in the sanctity of heterosexuality/ heteronormativity and a rejection of homosexuality as sinful,
- the assumption that the American way of life is best, and
- identification and partnership with political and social conservatism.⁵

12. Let's take a closer look at several of the bullet points on page 26.
- a. What does it mean to interpret the Bible literally? What does it not mean?

In the deconstruction movement, rejecting a "literal reading" of the Bible often means rejecting the idea that the text has a literal, objective meaning the Christian needs to discover and accept. Biblical interpretation becomes subjective, or the Bible is rejected altogether.

The Deconstruction of Christianity, page 35

- b. Faithful Christians disagree on the specifics of what the Bible says about women and what that means in the life of a believer. Putting all that aside, what are some things the Bible does *not* say about women that are often held up as a caricature or straw man that many deconstructionists tear down?

For Christians, politics will flow downstream from theology. In other words, how we vote and engage politically will be informed by what we believe about God and what he says in his Word.

The Deconstruction of Christianity, page 39

13. Do you think *evangelical* is a helpful term? In what ways are you uncomfortable with that label?

PRAY

Close your time together with prayer. Invite group members to share briefly about their struggles, particularly as they pertain to deconstruction. You might want to keep a list of family members and friends for whom people are praying as they work to understand the deconstructionist movement. Prayer requests must be kept confidential in the group. End your time with a simple prayer such as the one below:

Dear heavenly Father,

The topics we've discussed are heavy on our hearts. We are so sad to see people moving from honest doubt to faith deconstruction. We pray for your protection over the hearts and minds of those we love. Help them to see truth and to know you intimately. We pray for

- Some deconstructionists say they are looking for revival. What kind of revival are you praying for?

TAKE ACTION

We are not helpless victims of deconstruction. There are helpful, healthy actions we can take to fight this spiritual battle, and each week we will add one action step to our armory. By the end of these six sessions, you will know how you can be a proactive ambassador for truth. Along the way, these action steps will increase your compassion for and understanding of those who are deconstructing their faith. This week the action step is simply to **pray**.

- Add people you know who are deconstructing to your prayer list and pray for them daily. Ask that God would open their eyes to truth. Ask for wisdom in your interactions with them. Ask for God to increase your love for them and help you express love to them in healthy ways.
- Pray that your own understanding of faith deconstruction would grow through this study. Pray that God would reveal the truth to you.
- Pray in faith. Use passages such as Ephesians 1:16-20 or Jude 1:20-25 to inform your prayers.

