



FOREWORD BY
CARL R. TRUEMAN

THE DECONSTRUCTION OF CHRISTIANITY

WHAT IT IS,
WHY IT'S DESTRUCTIVE,
AND HOW TO RESPOND



AUTHOR OF *ANOTHER GOSPEL?*

ALISA CHILDERS
AND **TIM BARNETT**

CREATOR OF *RED PEN LOGIC*

It's finally here—the clear, gracious, definitive book on deconstruction. If you've been confused about what deconstruction is and why it's happening—or if you want to help people who are questioning their faith—then get this book.

JOHN L. COOPER, front man of the Christian rock band Skillet, author of *Awake and Alive to Truth*, and host of the *Cooper Stuff Podcast*

With sharp minds for the issue but soft hearts for those beguiled by it, Alisa Childers and Tim Barnett skillfully clarify the chaos in their timely and readable *The Deconstruction of Christianity*. They are uniquely gifted to decipher the terminology, simplify the philosophical concepts, and give solid advice on how to respond to the trend. If you have loved ones caught in the deconstruction web woven by “exvangelical” YouTubers and TikTokers, let Childers and Barnett guide you out of the confusing tangle.

GREGORY KOUKL, president of Stand to Reason; author of *Street Smarts, Tactics*, and *The Story of Reality*

The greatest barrier to people even “hearing” what Christians say today is their view of truth. Christianity is no longer treated as an objective truth claim but only as an expression of personal emotion and experience—*my* truth versus *your* truth. This is called the fact/value split, and it is now permeating the church as well, where it is a major factor in the movement to “deconstruct” historic Christianity. This book will help you recover the conviction that biblical truth is true to all of reality.

NANCY PEARCEY, professor and scholar in residence at Houston Christian University, author of several books including *Total Truth* and *Finding Truth*

Alisa Childers and Tim Barnett have patiently combed through myriad books, articles, tweets, and YouTube videos to get to the issues at the heart of the “deconstruction of Christianity,” which is one of the most significant challenges to Christianity in America today. They take deconstructionists’ critiques head-on, seriously address their attacks on Christianity, and then provide strong arguments in favor of the faith given once for all to the saints (Jude 1:3).

DOUGLAS GROOTHUIS, PHD, professor of philosophy at Denver Seminary; author of *Christian Apologetics*, 2nd ed.

Well written and theologically sound, this book sheds much-needed light on the phenomenon called deconstruction. It is an excellent resource for the church in an age of misapprehension, confusion, and doubt regarding the truths of biblical Christianity. This is a must-read for church leaders and everyday Christians alike. I highly recommend it.

BECKETT COOK, author of *A Change of Affection: A Gay Man’s Incredible Story of Redemption* and host of *The Becket Cook Show* podcast

Every generation must defend the gospel anew. And like every generation, we must have a showdown with the wolves of our time. That’s why Alisa Childers and Tim Barnett’s book, *The Deconstruction of Christianity*, is a must-read. Childers and Barnett write with clarity, urgency, and courage. I love many things about this book, but one is that the authors speak plainly and clearly about the problem and the people causing it—there’s no pandering on these pages. I thank God for Childers and Barnett, and pray that the Lord will use this book mightily. This book is the wake-up call that the true church needs.

ROSARIA BUTTERFIELD, author of *Five Lies of Our Anti-Christian Age*

This book not only helps us understand what deconstruction is or isn't, but more importantly it helps us understand how to be caring, loving, and thoughtful regarding people who are caught in the confusing cultural winds of our day.

DAN KIMBALL, author of *How (Not) to Read the Bible*, vice president and professor at Western Seminary

The past decade has seen a rise of deconversion stories with “exvangelicals” even creating communities for deconstruction. Yet behind every story is a devastated parent or loved one. How did this happen? What is deconstruction? Where can I find help? Look no further. In *The Deconstruction of Christianity*, Alisa Childers and Tim Barnett give an immensely important explanation of the how, what, and who of deconstruction. With clarity and compassion, they adeptly explain this tragic phenomenon that finds its genesis in a rejection of God's truth and a blind embrace of human experience. But there is hope. If your loved one has deconstructed, this is a must-read.

DR. CHRISTOPHER YUAN, speaker, author of *Holy Sexuality and the Gospel*, and producer of The Holy Sexuality Project video series for parents and their teens

As deconstructionism continues to be on the rise, more and more professing Christians are leaving the faith. This new book from my good friends Tim Barnett and Alisa Childers so eloquently explains everything you need to know about why people deconstruct their faith, and more importantly, how we can come alongside to help them build an even stronger faith. If you or someone you know is considering leaving Christianity, this book is a must-read. I trust it will be a valuable resource to aid the body of Christ for many years to come.

ALLEN PARR, author of *Misled: 7 Lies That Distort the Gospel (and How You Can Discern the Truth)* and founder of The BEAT YouTube channel

As a professor who works with hundreds of students a year at a Christian university, I have a front-row seat to the phenomenon of deconstruction. Some students are seeking honest answers to honest questions, wrestling through whether the faith of their upbringing can pass intellectual muster and offer them a more meaningful, loving, and just way to live. (Spoiler: It can!) But some find themselves drawn to the #exvangelical progressive Christianity so often pushed by online celebrities and social media algorithms. Alisa Childers and Tim Barnett have done us all a tremendous service. For its careful nuance, probing cultural analysis, biblical depth, and hope-filled defense of the historic faith, *The Deconstruction of Christianity* will be a top resource I recommend to anyone experiencing the trend (as old as Genesis 3) of lost faith.

THADDEUS WILLIAMS, professor of theology at Biola University and author of *Don't Follow Your Heart: Boldly Breaking the 10 Commandments of Self-Worship*

In the guise of self-care and critical thinking, “deconstruction” is spreading like wildfire, burning whatever it touches and destroying the faith of many. This book’s analysis of the issues, both logically and emotionally, will pour water on that fire. I can’t overstate how important this book is for the great faith crisis of our time. Before you deconstruct, read this book.

MIKE WINGER, teacher of BibleThinker online ministry

This book is so needed. In a conversation that is often full of broad brush statements and confusion, Alisa and Tim have accomplished what they set out to do—address deconstruction in a way that is reasonable, accurate, and filled with grace. I highly recommend this book.

JINGER DUGGAR VUOLO, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Becoming Free Indeed: My Story of Disentangling Faith from Fear*

The Deconstruction of Christianity



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**THE
DECONSTRUCTION
OF
CHRISTIANITY**

WHAT IT IS,
WHY IT'S DESTRUCTIVE,
AND HOW TO RESPOND

**ALISA CHILDERS
AND TIM BARNETT**

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For Dyllan and Ayden

*That you might love the Lord and walk
with him all the days of your life*

Mom (Alisa)

For Julianna, Jocelyn, and Alison

*That you might love the Lord, delight in his
Word, and walk in the truth*

Dad (Tim)

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Foreword

APOSTASY IS NOTHING NEW. Ever since Paul mentioned in 2 Timothy 4:10 that his erstwhile colleague Demas had fallen in love with the things of this world and abandoned him, the church has been aware that there are those whose profession of Christianity, while often powerfully expressed in the moment, proves weak and transient in the long term. Every generation has its high-profile apostates. What is new is the cool postmodern terminology that has emerged in the English-speaking West for doing so: that of “deconstructing the faith.”

On one level, the language of deconstruction in this context is something of a pose: Those who use the term and its cognates often have little grasp of its origins or its technical meaning. Thus, its use gives a novel, intellectual veneer of sophistication to something more prosaic: the age-old phenomenon of abandoning Christianity. The sophisticated linguistic theories associated with Jacques Derrida and his followers are not typically a direct inspiration for what is being described. Nor, one might add, is “deconstructing the

faith” culturally akin to the Derrida project. Deconstruction (and its close relative post-structuralism) emerged as a force among French intellectuals in the wake of the Nazi occupation of France and the devastation of the Second World War. Its rejection of stable meaning was not something joyful and liberating; rather it spoke of a European despair. Only when this concept was transposed to America, where pre-9/11 the culture had a perennial optimism to it, was deconstruction welcomed as a positive, liberating force.

This loss of meaning points to one key affinity between postmodern American deconstruction and the current penchant for apostasy: Both see external authority as a problem of manipulative power structures and their demolition as liberating. Deconstruction in the technical sense might be seen to find inspiration in Nietzsche’s comment that humans will never be free of God until they are free of grammar. In the same way, the contemporary “deconstructing the faith” movement thinks in less nuanced but substantially similar ways: We will never be free until we are free of God. Our current apostates present deconstructing the faith as a joyful discovery of meaning, not as a tragic and disorienting loss. Sadly, it really will prove to be the latter, no matter how cheerful the dime-a-dozen TikTok deconstructionists appear to their audiences. They do not feel the icy chill of the void into which they are plunging. Freedom, after the initial buzz has worn off, can indeed be a nightmare, with the responsibility of self-creation impossible and thus unbearable.

Rebellion against external authority is not an innovation in human behavior: From the Garden of Eden through Sinai to Calvary and beyond, human beings have sought to define

themselves and their world on their own terms. But as noted, the language, or idiom, for this rebellion changes over time, which means that the church must keep two things in mind. First, she must not lose sight of the fact that the current problem with apostasy is not fundamentally different from the problem in the past. Demas rejected the faith for the same reason the TikTok apostate does: He loved the world more than he loved Christ.

Yet the idiom of apostasy does change, and thus it behooves those engaged in the important pastoral work to persuade those flirting with deconstruction of the error of their ways. And that means having a good sense of the specific logic and language of the times.

This is where Alisa and Tim's book is so helpful. Here the reader will find the current Christian deconstruction movement set against the broad background of postmodernism and explained both in terms of contemporary idiom and issues and basic biblical foundations. Dare one say it? Alisa and Tim help the reader to deconstruct the deconstructionists and thus to respond to them, both with arguments and with pastoral love and sensitivity. This is a timely book. I hope, ironically, that its time will pass—that the topic it deals with may be consigned to the dustbin of church history at some point. But for now, this deconstructing of the deconstructionists is a vital task.

Carl R. Trueman
Grove City College
Good Friday, 2023



PART I

#EXVANGELICAL

I (ALISA) WAS STANDING IN THE FOYER of a church where I had just spoken at a Christian worldview conference when I was approached by an elderly couple with downcast faces. Without wasting time on pleasantries, the man said, “Our son . . .” Surprised by his own tears, he stopped short. The gray-haired woman next to him laid her hand on his shoulder and continued. “Our son deconstructed. He isn’t a Christian anymore. We don’t know what to do.”

“My wife and I did everything,” the man said, shaking his head. “We brought him up as a Christian, raised him in church. We taught him to love God and his Word. We thought we’d done everything right. But several years ago he started claiming that the church is too exclusive. Then he complained that Christians are intolerant and unloving.”

“Now he tells us we’re toxic and won’t let us see our grandkids,” his wife added. “What do we do? How can we get our son back and be invited into our grandkids’ lives again?”

Sadly, this story represents countless similar scenarios in which parents, grandparents, pastors, spouses, and friends are

faced with the tricky task of figuring out how to navigate the complex and sometimes volatile phenomenon that is sweeping up their loved ones.

I (Tim) sat across from Adam, a freshman in high school, at a local coffee shop. This was our first meeting, but I could tell right away that Adam was one of those kids who always needs to know why. He had been struggling with big questions about his faith, so his dad arranged for the two of us to have a conversation.

“I lost all my friends,” Adam lamented. He recalled how his best friend of five years recently “came out” and wanted to know what he, as a Christian, thought about it. In a text message exchange, Adam carefully communicated his Christian convictions with truth and compassion. Sadly, Adam’s friend took screenshots of their conversation and shared it with their high school friends. Soon he was being called “homophobic,” and most of his friends from school wouldn’t talk to him.

During our discussion, Adam mentioned that he’d discovered some TikTok videos that argue *from the Bible* that homosexual activity isn’t a sin. With desperation, he told me, “If that’s true, I might get my friends back.” The pressure for Adam to capitulate to culture and adjust his beliefs was overwhelming. But we all feel it, don’t we? Faithfulness to God comes at a cost. It’s easier to submit to societal opinions than to stand on scriptural truth. Many Christians are feeling the pull to align their views with culture or their own personal preferences. For Adam, deconstructing the biblical view of sexuality wasn’t just academic; it was personal. As he put it: “I might get my friends back.”

These stories aren’t unique. Perhaps you, like so many,

have someone in your life who is going through a process of deconstruction or who is being tempted to deconstruct their faith. Maybe you are experiencing heartbreaking loss and confusion, and are desperate for a lifeline. You are why we wrote this book.

It all started when I (Tim) was sitting on the back pew in an old chapel that more closely resembled a barn than a place of worship. I had been tasked with teaching a weeklong series on deconstruction for the morning Bible study. Through my research, I realized how much confusion there is about this topic and how much the church needs help addressing it. It also became clear that deconstruction is a transition away from historic Christianity and toward something else. For example, some who deconstruct their faith end up in so-called progressive Christianity. Given Alisa's work on this subject, I sent her a text message to see if she was going to write a much-needed book on deconstruction.

Meanwhile, I (Alisa) was beginning to think more deeply about the topic of deconstruction and noticed that not many Christian leaders were even talking about it. I had also noticed a couple of Tim's social media posts about deconstruction and thought, *He gets it!* I was so excited to see someone I trust tackle it head-on. Then one day, out of the blue, I received a text from Tim.

"Alisa, are you going to write a book on deconstruction?"

"Ugh. I'm trying to finish writing my second book and am drowning!" I replied.

"Want to write one together?" Tim asked, half-joking.

Immediately I knew this was destined to happen. "Let's talk," I typed. Those two words would lead to this moment.

If you're reading this book, you are probably not in deconstruction, but you may be trying to understand what's happening to someone you love. You might feel overwhelmed by the deconstruction stories dominating your newsfeed, the confusing and chaotic messages that often accompany the hashtags #deconstruction and #exvangelical, and the very real relational and emotional impact this phenomenon is having on your everyday life. If that's you, it's okay. Maybe it's time to press the pause button on social media. Put down your phone, close Twitter, and take a break from Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. All of that will still be there when you return. Take a breath. Rest assured, we will walk you through what deconstruction is and how it works, and give you practical advice on how to relate with friends and loved ones going through it.

On the other hand, this concept might still be a bit abstract to you. You can see it happening, but it isn't touching your life in a concrete way. Maybe you simply want to understand why deconstruction seems to be so popular and learn more about what it is, where it originated, and how to respond.

If you are reading this book and *are* in deconstruction, we're really glad you've picked it up. While the book is primarily written to Christians who are experiencing deconstruction *from the outside*, we hope to present the topic in a way that is reasonable, accurate, and filled with grace for those experiencing it *from the inside*.

What you are about to read are the prayerful observations, thoughtful analyses, and honest conclusions of two people who have spent a significant amount of time collectively—as

a team—living, studying, eating, sleeping, and breathing deconstruction.

We've listened to countless deconstruction stories. We've read books written by people who have deconstructed. We've jumped headlong into the deconstruction echo chambers on Twitter, TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram. We've met privately with proponents of deconstruction on Zoom. Our main objective in writing this book is to analyze the phenomenon of deconstruction and provide a biblical analysis and critique of its methods, trends, messages, and impact on the church.

This book is broken into three parts. In part 1, we identify deconstruction as it manifests in our homes, in our churches, and on social media. We define the word and give a thirty-thousand-foot view of how it has grown from a hashtag into a phenomenon, complete with conferences, coaches, and countless social media accounts. Then in part 2, we dig down into the details. We pull it all apart and analyze the many reasons *why* people are deconstructing, *how* they are deconstructing, and *what* they are deconstructing. We also consider *who* is going through it—the very real people undergoing deconstruction. We offer what we think is a better solution to the nagging doubts, difficult questions, and false ideas that haunt many Christians. Finally, in part 3, we focus on how we can best love and help those in our lives who might be in deconstruction. Please know that there is hope.

Let's dive in. What is deconstruction? Some might call it a movement. We think it's more like an explosion.

EXPLOSION

“IT IS TIME FOR US AND YOUR GENERATION to declare war on this idolatrous deconstruction Christian movement!” declared Skillet front man John Cooper to the ecstatic applause of about fifteen thousand Christian youth at a popular music festival. Clips from Cooper’s monologue were widely discussed on YouTube, Twitter, and TikTok and became the subject of several articles released by major Christian online platforms. *Relevant* magazine claimed Cooper was operating from “a fundamental misunderstanding of what ‘deconstruction’ is,”¹ while ChurchLeaders took a more neutral approach, allowing Cooper and some of his critics to clarify and further expound their opinions.² Soon, several others threw their proverbial hats in the online ring of the deconstruction conversation.³ This flood of articles and social

media commentary revealed a split between people who were defining deconstruction in two contradictory ways and seemed to be unaware of one another.

On the one hand, Cooper and the fifteen thousand or so youth at the Winter Jam festival were defining deconstruction as a move away from historic Christianity, which often results in deconversion and an almost religious zeal to deconvert others. The other group was defining deconstruction as a more straightforward process of “re-examining the faith you grew up with.”⁴ With those two definitions in mind, it’s not difficult to see why Cooper’s comments received such an explosive reception.

DECLARING WAR?

When speaking with the ChurchLeaders reporter, Cooper was careful to distinguish between people who ask questions about their faith and those who exit the faith altogether. He said he was calling out “formerly Christian leaders/influencers leaving the faith in a public way.”⁵ When Cooper declared “war” on deconstruction, he was speaking of *spiritual* warfare. Many Christians misunderstand spiritual warfare as referring only to power encounters with demonic spirits. Of course, there is some of that. But the fundamental nature of spiritual warfare is *not* power encounters; it’s truth encounters.⁶ It’s a battle of *ideas*.

“We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ,” writes the apostle Paul about the “weapons of our warfare” (2 Corinthians 10:4-5). The Bible also

tells us that our enemy is not any group of people, but rather the “spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:12). Jesus tells us about this enemy, called the devil, whom he describes as a murderer from the beginning, in whom there is no truth at all. Jesus says, “When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies” (John 8:44). In fact, he is the “deceiver of the whole world” (Revelation 12:9). Notice how the battlefield is in the realm of “opinions,” “knowledge of God,” “arguments,” and “thoughts.” As Christians, the primary weapon of our warfare is truth. If we want to “stand against the schemes of the devil,” we must “put on the whole armor of God,” which begins with “the belt of truth” (Ephesians 6:11, 14). We need to be vigilant to resist, oppose, and refute false ideas while remaining loving and compassionate toward the people who are being taken “captive” by them (Colossians 2:8). Therefore, if deconstruction really is a movement that seeks to lead Christians away from truth and encourages them to deconvert from the faith, declaring spiritual war on it would be prudent, wise, and biblical.

We need to be vigilant to resist, oppose, and refute false ideas while remaining loving and compassionate toward the people who are being taken “captive” by them (Colossians 2:8).

However, if deconstruction simply means rethinking what you believe, engaging your doubts, or asking hard questions, declaring spiritual war on it would be unbiblical, fearful, and downright mean. After all, the Bible instructs us over and over again *not* to believe every spirit. We’re told to “test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many

false prophets have gone out into the world” (1 John 4:1). John goes on to explain in verses 5 and 6 that Christians should evaluate the claims of spiritual teachers to determine whether they are speaking “from the world” or speaking truth from God. Specifically, we should consider whether or not these teachers listen to those who were sent by God. At the time when John was writing, this meant the apostles. Today, that means their words recorded in Scripture. In Philippians 1:9-10, Paul prayed that Christians would abound in love, “with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent.” In Acts 17:11, he also praises the Bereans for “examining” his words against the Scriptures to make sure he was telling the truth.

In addition, we are to be compassionate to those who ask questions because of a sincere desire to get at the truth. Jude assumes there will be doubters, instructing, “Have mercy on those who doubt” (Jude 1:22), and Jesus, rather than silencing doubters, is continually tender with them (more on this in chapter 5). Asking your hard questions, correcting your false beliefs, and facing your deepest doubts are all a natural part of maturing as a Christian.

So between these two definitions of deconstruction, which is correct? In order to bring clarity to the confusion, we need to answer the million-dollar question: What is deconstruction?

WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

Have you ever had a young kid ask you a question *and you had absolutely no idea what they were talking about?* A few

years ago, while I (Tim) was celebrating my wife's birthday, my six-year-old daughter's face narrowed into a quizzical look as she asked, "Dad, what does a one-two smell like?"

Confused by her question, I said, "Julianna, one and two are numbers, and numbers don't have a smell." Logically speaking, she was making a category mistake. But try explaining that to a six-year-old.

Not at all impressed by my stellar critical thinking skills, and equally perplexed by my reply, she said, "No, Dad, what does a one-two smell like?"

Repeating the question didn't help. Now I was even *more* confused. I didn't know what else to say. Then my four-year-old, Jocelyn, observing our communication stalemate, said, "Dad, 'you look like a monkey and you smell like . . . one-two.' So, what does a 'one-two' smell like?"

When terms are not clearly understood, we can end up talking past one another. Multiple meanings create confusion, especially when it comes to a word as emotionally charged as *deconstruction*. This was on full display in the weeks following the John Cooper declaration and the subsequent op-eds, hot takes, and articles that put deconstruction front and center.

A decade ago, hardly anyone would have used the word *deconstruction* to describe their spiritual journey. Yet today, the word has made its way into our common vocabulary, along with words like *yeet*, *sus*, and *metaverse*. (If you don't know what those words mean, we'll pause for you to go ask a teenager.) In fact, our social media feeds are flooded with people detailing their faith deconstructions—people like Rhett McLaughlin and Link Neal (from *Good Mythical*

Morning YouTube channel), Joshua Harris (of *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*), Michael and Lisa Gungor (from Gungor), Jon Steingard (from Hawk Nelson), Kevin Max (from DC Talk), Phanatik (from The Cross Movement), and Derek Webb (from Caedmon’s Call).

In the summer of 2019, the Christian world was shocked by news that Joshua Harris—the evangelical poster child for purity culture—had deconstructed his faith. A month later, it was Marty Sampson’s turn. In a now deleted Instagram post, the former Hillsong worship leader informed his followers that he was “genuinely losing my faith.”⁷ Fast-forward six months to when *Good Mythical Morning* YouTuber Rhett McLaughlin detailed his “spiritual deconstruction” from Christian to “hopeful agnostic” in a video viewed more than 2.8 million times.⁸ Next came Jon Steingard, the lead singer of the band Hawk Nelson. In a now deleted nine-image Instagram post, he wrote:

After growing up in a Christian home, being a pastor’s kid, playing and singing in a Christian band, and having the word “Christian” in front of most of the things in my life—I am now finding that I no longer believe in God. . . . I’ve been terrified to post this for a while—but it feels like it’s time for me to be honest.⁹

DC Talk was a household name in Christian circles in the nineties. In fact, memorizing the lyrics to “Jesus Freak” was practically a spiritual sacrament. (Every church kid from that era knows exactly what was on the man’s big fat belly that wiggled around like marmalade jelly.) That’s why many were

shocked when Kevin Max posted on Twitter, “Hello, my name is Kevin Max & I’m an #exvangelical.”¹⁰ Max followed up by explaining he’s been “deconstructing for decades” and tweeting that he now follows “the Universal Christ.”¹¹ This was confusing for Christians who had never heard of the Universal Christ, which is a belief in the “presence of the divine in literally ‘every thing’ and ‘every one.’”¹²

It wasn’t just famous musicians and artists announcing their exits from historic Christianity. Paul Maxwell, former theological content writer for *Desiring God*, an organization founded by John Piper, joined the fray. In an Instagram video, he said, “I think it’s important to say that I’m just not a Christian anymore, and it feels really good. I’m really happy.”¹³

The word being used to describe these experiences, and others like them, is *deconstruction*. Along with the higher profile deconstructions, there has been an explosion of TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter accounts dedicated to celebrating the mass exodus from a belief system that many have come to regard as toxic, oppressive, and abusive. Often, these memes, videos, and images are posted alongside the hashtags #deconstruction and #exvangelical. For example, at the time of this writing, a quick search on Instagram reveals the #deconstruction tag being used on 340,000 posts. On TikTok, videos using the deconstruction hashtag have accumulated 714 million views.¹⁴

To call something a movement would imply a group of people *moving* together, united around common principles and sharing the same goal. Deconstruction is a bit like a movement in the way people find community, share stories,

and tend to reject the same set of beliefs they now deem harmful. But because deconstruction can lead to so many different destinations, with some people landing in agnosticism, some in progressive Christianity, some in secular humanism, and some in a more self-styled spirituality, it's more like an explosion, blasting out in all different directions. There's also been an explosion in *how* the word is used.¹⁵ If you ask ten different people to define *deconstruction*, you might get eleven different definitions. That's because there is no agreed-upon, authoritative, univocal understanding of what it means. When someone says, "I'm deconstructing my faith," they could mean anything from asking questions, experiencing doubts, and correcting beliefs to rejecting Scripture, following cultural norms, or leaving Christianity altogether. But if deconstruction means everything, it means nothing.

Take, for example, the case of Joshua Harris. Many Christian teenagers were given a copy of his bestselling book, *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, which practically became canon in the evangelical culture of the late 1990s and early 2000s. Nearly two decades later, a week after announcing his divorce, Harris posted a picture of himself pensively staring out over a serene lake, surrounded by beautiful ice-capped mountains, with a caption that read,

The information that was left out of our announcement is that I have undergone a massive shift in regard to my faith in Jesus. The popular phrase for this is "deconstruction," the biblical phrase is "falling away." By all the measurements that I have for defining a Christian, I am not a Christian.¹⁶

When Harris made his big announcement, virtually no one questioned his definition of deconstruction as being synonymous with “falling away.” At the time, that seemed to be the general understanding of what someone meant when they said they had “deconstructed.” But for many today, deconstruction doesn’t always involve walking away from faith but instead may entail a redefinition of that faith.

In his book *After Doubt*, A. J. Swoboda defines faith deconstruction as “the process of dismantling one’s accepted beliefs.”¹⁷ Swoboda sees this as a “journey of questioning, critiquing, and reevaluating previous faith commitments.”¹⁸ This is a much broader definition that includes not only people abandoning their faith but also, say, an evangelical Christian who is questioning a secondary doctrine like young-earth creationism or doubting a denominational distinctive like dispensationalism while remaining committed to the faith. So one person could use the word to describe their decision to leave Christianity but another could use it to mean their choice to reject young-earth creationism while remaining evangelical. Can you see why so many are confused by the word?

There has been an effort by Christians to solve this ambiguity problem. Since the word *deconstruction* covers such a large landscape, some have proposed a distinction between “good deconstruction” and “bad deconstruction.” For example, pastor and *New York Times* bestselling author John Mark Comer said this:

The first thing that must be said about deconstruction is that there is a good type of deconstruction. . . . This

is the type of deconstruction where Jesus, and others, used Scripture to critique the world's corruption of the church. But then there's another type of deconstruction, that of Western millennials, who use the world to critique Scripture's authority over the church.¹⁹

Similarly, Grammy Award–winning rapper and producer Lecrae described two types of deconstruction happening in the church. In a Twitter thread, he wrote, “One type of deconstruction actually involves using scriptures to deconstruct unhealthy ideas and practices.”²⁰ He calls this “healthy” deconstruction. Conversely, he continues, “Many millennials are using culture to challenge scripture. This often leads to culture taking precedence over scripture & sadly people begin to deconstruct themselves out of the faith. We begin to question the Bible because it doesn't line up w/ culture.”²¹ Lecrae calls this type of deconstruction “unhealthy”²² and “dangerous.”²³

Both Comer and Lecrae recognize that all “deconstruction” is *not* the same. Furthermore, they communicate the value of asking questions, rejecting legalism, standing against abuse, reforming beliefs, and engaging doubts. They express compassion for the hurt and struggles people are going through, and both propose a way forward that communicates an emphasis on God and his Word. Consequently, they provide an important distinction between two different approaches to examining faith—one biblical; the other unbiblical.

While we agree with all of that, we want to make a

suggestion. When we started our investigation of deconstruction, we also thought adding adjectives to the word (like *healthy* versus *unhealthy* or *good* versus *bad*) would help solve the confusion. But now we actually think it makes things worse.

BAPTIZING WORDS

Although we certainly understand why some Christian thought leaders and influencers are using the word to encourage discernment, reformation, and healthy questioning, there are a number of reasons why the word *deconstruction* should not be baptized, redeemed, or Christianized to mean something healthy or positive. First, what pastors call “good deconstruction” (i.e., using the Scriptures to challenge the ideas you hold) doesn’t match the common use of the word in the culture, which usually calls for the rejection of Scripture as a standard. In fact, the further we got into our research, the clearer it became that we wouldn’t find many people in the deconstruction explosion who still believed in Scripture as their absolute authority. It seemed the only people who were using the word that way were Christian pastors and apologists who were trying to keep people in the faith.

For the majority of people from the broader culture in the deconstruction movement, the Bible is seen as a tool of oppression to be rejected, not a standard of truth to be affirmed. In fact, most major deconstruction platforms bristle at the idea that anything other than one’s personal conscience should guide an individual toward breaking free from oppressive systems (perceived or actual) and toxic

theology, which is defined as any doctrine or practice that someone deems harmful.

Ironically, many in the deconstruction community agree with us on this point. In the deconstruction online community, if you use the Bible to “deconstruct,” or if you remain an evangelical Christian during or after deconstruction, then you never *really* deconstructed. For example, Andrew Kerbs runs the Instagram platform @deconstruct_everything with over 24,000 followers. In response to someone who wrote, “Do not deconstruct without the Bible in hand, or apart from the local church,” he replied, “So . . . don’t actually deconstruct is what I’m hearing you say.”²⁴ Another popular deconstructionist posted a meme conveying a similar sentiment. At the top a hypothetical evangelical pastor is quoted as saying, “I don’t have a problem with deconstruction, you see I too have deconstructed.” Underneath that statement is a picture of a Chihuahua cutting his eyes in skepticism and disapproval. The caption below reads, “I’ll eat my hat if the next thing they say isn’t some variation of ‘you just have to do it biblically.’”²⁵

When Christians co-opt the word, redefining it, the deconstruction community thinks we’re being deceptive. David Hayward, a former pastor, warned his followers of evangelicals who use the word *deconstruction* with a particular agenda. He said, “Some people use the word *deconstruction* to lure you back into the fold. Don’t go for it.”²⁶ Even worse, many deconstructionists attribute bad motives to Christian leaders using the word. In an article titled “The Age of Deconstruction and Future of the Church,” Kurtis Vanderpool warns, “There will be a long line of evangelical

leaders attempting to co-opt and redirect deconstruction for their own purposes. It is a desperate attempt to hold on to their people, hold on to their influence, hold on to their way of life without having to be held accountable for what their way of life has produced.”²⁷

Here’s the point: Many in the deconstruction spaces don’t think an experience can be rightly called deconstruction if the one claiming to have deconstructed remains a historical Christian or holds to biblical authority. And frankly, we agree.

Second, when people redefine words, the first casualty is clarity, and communication is compromised. This is why some people are confused about whether or not Mormons are Christians. After all, Mormons espouse belief in God, Jesus, and the gospel. But there’s a problem. What they mean by God, Jesus, and the gospel is radically different from what Christians mean. As many have said, they have the same vocabulary but are using a different dictionary. For example, the Mormon god is “an exalted man”²⁸ with “a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man’s.”²⁹ For Mormons, Jesus is the created spirit brother of Lucifer. Furthermore, the Mormon gospel is the good news that if we obey God’s commandments well enough, “we can become like our Heavenly Father” and “live in the highest degree of the celestial kingdom of heaven.”³⁰ This includes leading our own worlds populated by our own spirit children.³¹ So it turns out, when Christians and Mormons talk about God, Jesus, or the gospel, they are talking about completely different things. Notice that when a Mormon says, “I believe in Jesus,” or “I’m trusting in God,” it’s not clear which Jesus, or which God, they’re talking about. Communication is compromised. Likewise, when

Christians co-opt and redefine the word *deconstruction* to mean something completely different from what the culture means, confusion abounds.

Third, while we understand the temptation to baptize the word, it can come across as fairly awkward. If you attended youth group in the nineties, you might have heard a youth pastor say, “Don’t get high on weed; get high on the Most High,” or “You don’t need a boyfriend because Jesus is your boyfriend.” These were such cringeworthy statements because some youth pastors were trying to baptize words. In an attempt to be relevant and meet students where they were, they radically redefined terms, and their ability to connect with students actually decreased rather than increased, along with their credibility. Let’s not make the same mistake today.

Philosophical baggage

Another concern has to do with the word’s philosophical baggage. The word *deconstruction* can be traced back to the twentieth-century French philosopher Jacques Derrida, known by many as the father of deconstruction. For Derrida, deconstruction meant “dismantling our excessive loyalty to any idea and learning to see the aspects of the truth that might lie buried in its opposite.”³² Ultimately, Derrida didn’t believe that words could be pinned down to singular meanings. In their book *Cynical Theories*, James Lindsay and Helen Pluckrose write, “For Derrida, the speaker’s meaning has no more authority than the hearer’s interpretation and thus intention cannot outweigh impact.”³³ Derrida applied deconstruction to both literary texts and political institutions. Today, it’s being applied to all areas of life, including

religious belief. Many people deconstructing their faith have no idea who Derrida is, yet his postmodern philosophy lives on in their deconstruction testimonies. In other words, they may not have heard his name, but they are using his playbook. We'll discuss this further in chapter 8.

Deconstruction's postmodern roots lead us to avoid using the term in any sort of positive sense. This might seem like nitpicking over semantics, but it's vital to make some important distinctions. Maybe an illustration will help. If you live in America, you've probably seen T-shirts, hats, and signs with the words Black Lives Matter or Make America Great Again. You probably also know that each of these slogans represents a set of beliefs. That's why some wouldn't be caught dead wearing a BLM T-shirt (even though they affirm that black lives do, indeed, matter), while others would rather stick their hand in a blender than wear a MAGA hat (even though they want America to be great). These acronyms are loaded with political and ideological baggage. They aren't just simple, straightforward statements. Behind each mantra is a movement.

In a similar way, the word *deconstruction* has philosophical baggage. And when Christians wear the deconstruction label, they need to understand what's behind it. Whether people realize it or not, faith deconstruction is a form of postmodern deconstruction. And here's the irony: If we attempt to completely detach current deconstruction from the ideas of Derrida (the father of deconstruction) and define it subjectively, we are literally deconstructing the word *deconstruction* à la Derrida. And if the meaning of that word signifies any number of different things, at best we will be equivocating.

At worst, we will have bought into the assumptions of post-modernism hook, line, and sinker.

A question of authority

As Christians, we want to use accurate language to describe our understanding of how to live as followers of Jesus, and when we use the word *deconstruction* according to its common usage today, we find that the concept it describes is not present in the Bible. When advising us on how to evaluate our beliefs, Scripture talks about using discernment (Hebrews 5:14), seeking understanding (Proverbs 2:2-5), abounding in knowledge and approving what is excellent (Philippians 1:9-10), and holding fast to what is good (1 Thessalonians 5:21). Nowhere in Scripture do we find approval for the practice of deconstruction.

Jesus never says, “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to deconstruct everything I have commanded you.” Instead, Jesus commissions his followers to make more disciples and to “obey everything I have commanded you” (see Matthew 28:16-20, NIV). There is no Great Decommission.

The practice of deconstruction is fundamentally at odds with Christianity. Here’s why. First, deconstruction has little to do with trying to achieve correct theology. Take, for example, Melissa Stewart, a former Christian, now an agnostic/atheist with a TikTok following of over 200,000. She describes how lonely and isolated she felt during her own deconstruction. Discovering the #exvangelical hashtag, she says, opened up a whole new world of voices who related

with what she was going through. Her TikTok platform now gives her the opportunity to create that type of space for others. In an interview on the *Exvangelical* podcast, she commented on the deconstruction/exvangelical online space:

My biggest experiences with it were people talking about what they went through—talking about their stories—and it was very personal and focused on the human beings who have come out of this rather than on whether or not a certain kind of theology is right or wrong.³⁴

She gets it. 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. Yet the goal for *all* Christians should be to align our beliefs with the Word of God, despite our own personal feelings or beliefs on the topic.

Second, there is no end goal, or destination, to the deconstruction process. There is just a never-ending skepticism of your view. As David Hayward said, "There isn't a right way to deconstruct, nor is there a right destination. You do you."³⁵

Derek Webb, former lead singer of Caedmon's Call, wrote, "The cycle of de & reconstruction is existentially exhausting. What I've found helpful is to simply stop constructing. 'Belief' is just too heavy a term. Other than maybe cause & effect, I'm done 'believing.' Hypothesizing in real-time + permanent uncertainty = a start."³⁶

Third, with deconstruction, there is no external authority to tell you what your view should look like. *You* are the ultimate authority. As one deconstructionist wrote, “I am not looking to adhere to any type of guidebook, any type of ‘how to,’ or any person telling me I must do it a certain way. I’m done being told what I must do to be doing things the *right* way.”³⁷ Notice the rejection of any external authority, including the Bible. In her book *Faithfully Different*, our friend Natasha Crain writes, “Deconstruction doesn’t usually imply a deconversion to atheism, but it’s certainly a deconversion of its own kind—from a worldview rooted in the authority of the Bible to a worldview rooted in the authority of the self.”³⁸

MY KINGDOM FOR A DEFINITION!

As Natasha succinctly articulated, at the heart of the deconstruction explosion is a rejection of biblical authority. Deconstruction emphasizes personal autonomy—the authority of the *self*. So here’s the big reveal. After months of research, practically living in the deconstruction and evangelical online spaces, and eating/drinking #deconstruction, we have seen deconstruction characterized in different ways. However, there is one dominant expression that can be summed up in one sentence. When we use the word *deconstruction*, here’s what we mean:

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

We could say a lot more about it, and we will. In fact, we will spend a great deal of time in this book defending this definition and demonstrating it to be true. We want to be clear what we are analyzing and critiquing, and what we aren't. We understand that there are people questioning, doubting, and critically examining their Christian beliefs according to what they find in Scripture (a healthy process!) and that they might be calling that deconstruction. But

At the heart of the deconstruction explosion is a rejection of biblical authority. Deconstruction emphasizes personal autonomy—the authority of the self.

we hope to demonstrate that, as Christians, we *already* have language for that. Our research has shown that deconstruction goes beyond just rethinking and asking questions—it's a specific process or methodology. It's *how* someone goes about rethinking their faith that makes the difference.

Now for a few more definitions. Much of this book will engage with the movement of deconstruction and the thought leaders who write the books, lead the seminars, organize the conferences, and run the social media platforms. We will call these thought leaders deconstructionists. 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. However, when we write about deconstructionists, we are *not* talking about the Christian high school student who has become confused by a YouTube video he watched about supposed Bible contradictions. We are *not* talking about a woman who

is just realizing she has been spiritually abused and is trying to find her way out. We are *not* talking about your sons, daughters, coworkers, friends, and loved ones who are critically examining their beliefs and are wading in the confusion of doubt. These situations would require a different response. We give some practical advice on this in chapter 12.

As we'll see in the next chapter, deconstruction isn't concerned with rethinking just any beliefs. Its primary concern is leaving behind what's characterized as "evangelical" beliefs. Many deconstructionists, in fact, are proud to call themselves exvangelicals.