

EDITED BY IVAN MESA

BEFORE YOU LOSE

DECONSTRUCTING
DOUBT IN
THE CHURCH

YOUR FAITH

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Before You Lose Your Faith: Deconstructing Doubt in the Church
Copyright © 2021 by The Gospel Coalition

Published by The Gospel Coalition

The Gospel Coalition
P.O. Box 170346
Austin, Texas 78717

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Art Direction: Steven Morales
Cover Design: Gabriel Reyes-Ordeix
Illustration: Aaron Schock
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ISBN:
978-0-9992843-7-7 (Print)
978-0-9992843-9-1 (Mobi)
978-0-9992843-8-4 (ePub)

Printed in the United States of America

CONTENTS

Introduction	I
IVAN MESA	

PART ONE DECONSTRUCT DECONSTRUCTION

1. Doubt Your Way Back to Truth	7
TREVIN WAX	
2. ‘Progressive’ Christianity Was Even Shallower Than the Evangelical Faith I Left	17
IAN HARBER	
3. Deconversion Is Not as Countercultural as You Think	25
BRETT MCCRACKEN	
4. Don’t Deconstruct—Disenculturate Instead	33
HUNTER BEAUMONT	

PART TWO
DECONSTRUCT THE ISSUES

- | | |
|--|-----|
| 5. Sex: Telling a Better Story | 45 |
| RACHEL GILSON | |
| 6. Race: Is Christianity a White Man's Religion? | 53 |
| CLAUDE ATCHO | |
| 7. Politics: Just Servant, Tyrannical Master | 61 |
| SAMUEL JAMES | |
| 8. Internet: Deconstructing Faith Online | 69 |
| JAY Y. KIM | |
| 9. Social Justice: Breakup or Breakthrough? | 77 |
| THADDEUS WILLIAMS | |
| 10. Science: Why Scientism Can't Explain Morality or Reality | 85 |
| KEITH PLUMMER | |
| 11. Anti-Intellectualism: We Must Ask Hard Questions | 93 |
| KAREN SWALLOW PRIOR | |
| 12. Hell: Skeleton in God's Closet? | 101 |
| JOSHUA RYAN BUTLER | |

PART THREE
RECONSTRUCT FAITH

- | | |
|--|-----|
| 13. Embrace True Belonging in the Church | 111 |
| JEREMY LINNEMAN | |
| 14. Sometimes People Don't Believe | 121 |
| JARED WILSON | |
| 15. Take a Hard Look at Jesus | 131 |
| DEREK RISHMAWY | |

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INTRODUCTION

IVAN MESA

I had never heard of Rhett and Link—the duo behind Good Mythical Morning (their daily YouTube show with more than 16 million subscribers) and Ear Biscuits (their podcast)—until I learned of their public deconstruction story. The two of them—who as of December 2020 are the fourth-highest YouTube earners, making \$20 million a year¹—shared about how they moved from Cru staffers and missionaries to unbelievers—or, as Rhett now describes himself, a “hopeful agnostic.” The comedians have for years been a staple in many homes with children and young adults (with videos ranging from “epic” rap battles to testing the world’s hottest peppers to getting shot with Nerf guns), so it wasn’t surprising that their public announcement unsettled the faith of many.

While deconstruction stories are nothing new in our secular age—for example, Jen Hatmaker still describes herself as a Christian and Joshua Harris doesn’t—it seems that for many, traditional Christian

1. Rupert Neate, “Ryan Kaji, 9, earns \$29.5m as this year’s highest-paid YouTuber,” *The Guardian*, December 18, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/dec/18/ryan-kaji-9-earns-30m-as-this-years-highest-paid-youtuber>.

faith is increasingly implausible. According to Rhett, “If I don’t *have* to believe [Christianity], then why would I?”

Given how prevalent these stories are becoming, we at The Gospel Coalition have asked some of our most trusted writers to address the deconstruction phenomenon from a number of perspectives. If you’re trying to make sense of your faith, I hope these chapters will give you perspective, answer questions, or at least help you understand you’re not alone. While it might seem like your world is being shaken, perhaps even like you’re experiencing a kind of death, we are convinced a more robust, settled faith can exist on the other side.

WHAT IS DECONSTRUCTION?

First, let’s define terms. According to one writer, “Deconstruction is the process of systematically dissecting and often rejecting the beliefs you grew up with. Sometimes the Christian will deconstruct all the way to atheism. Some remain there, but others experience a reconstruction. But the type of faith they end up embracing almost never resembles the Christianity they formerly knew.”²

Over the past several years, attention paid toward deconstruction stories has increased. And the trend extends far beyond the spotlight of well-known Christians with large social-media followings, book deals, and podcasts. It may be that the high-profile cases have normalized unbelief, emboldening ordinary folks to proceed in their own deconstruction journeys. That’s one of the ways social media could be accelerating this trend. Whereas 50 years ago it might’ve been hard to find a “community” of deconstructing Christians (and thus you didn’t feel it was a valid social option), now it’s easy to find such “community” online, further removing fears or stigmas that might be associated with spiritual deconstruction.

Of course, while technology has influenced some of these social dimensions, at its core this path toward unbelief is nothing new. Jesus himself warned of it: “Because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end will be

2. Alisa Childers, *Another Gospel?: A Lifelong Christian Seeks Truth in Response to Progressive Christianity* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2000), 24.

saved" (Matt. 24:12–13). From Demas (2 Tim. 4:10) to Hymenaeus and Philetus (1 Tim. 1:20; 2 Tim. 2:17), the early church saw many abandon the faith they once professed (1 John 2:19). We should be saddened, but we shouldn't be surprised.

After being rejected by family and by the nation of Israel (Mark 3:20–30), Jesus redefined true spiritual family as those who do God's will (3:35). Why do some believe and others don't? Why do even those who believe sometimes fail to persevere in faith? In the following chapter of Mark's Gospel we read the parable of the sower and the four soils (4:1–20). Only one out of the four soils produces fruit. Here we learn several important things about the gospel, faith in Jesus, and varying responses to the gospel. Relevant for our discussion, it explains why some who profess faith ultimately fall away. It's a warning for anyone who claims the name of Christ.

But your story, unlike these sober warnings, can end in settled hope and newfound joy.

LOOK TO JESUS

Because you're reading this book, you're likely seeking to make sense of your faith—if Jesus is worth trusting, if it's your own faith and not just some inherited belief system, if there are too many problematic or perplexing issues with Scripture, if it's worth putting up with the failures and hypocrisy of so many who claim the name of Christ. Perhaps these concerns have only exacerbated your doubts, with so many to count that you don't even know where to begin.

Maybe you look around at the contemporary church landscape and think, *This can't be what Jesus had in mind*. Perhaps you've observed a version of cultural Christianity that has more to do with the American Dream than Jesus of Nazareth.

In many times and in many places, believers have struggled with the disappointing fact that not everything calling itself "Christian" resembles the character of Christ and the testimony of the historic church. We'll always see cultural expressions of Christianity that may be more or less biblical. And we'll always be rightly frustrated by this disconnect—sometimes to the point of wanting to disassociate from the mess altogether.

Perhaps you come from a community that didn't live out the Bible. Or perhaps you've not yet found a community where the gospel actually seems alive and real. We want this book to introduce to you a community of believers who've wrestled through these struggles, helped others amid their doubts, and have maybe even experienced deconstruction themselves. Because Christianity—to be more specific, Jesus—can help, whatever your questions. Whatever your struggle, it gets better with more—not less—Christianity. It might be tempting to leave the church in order to find the answers. But we want you to reconsider the church as the best place to deal with your doubts and deconstruction.

Deconstructing, however jarring and emotionally exhausting, need not end in a cul-de-sac of unbelief. In fact, deconstructing can be the road toward reconstructing—building up a more mature, robust faith that grapples honestly with the deepest questions of life. As you read, we pray that Jesus would be more precious to you; that the church, though filled with shortcomings and sins, would welcome and point you to him; and that on the other side of this process, you too would glory in your Savior as you tell others of his never-failing love.

PART ONE

**DECONSTRUCT
DECONSTRUCTION**

DOUBT YOUR WAY BACK TO TRUTH

TREVIN WAX

Whenever I hear of someone leaving the church (this time for good!) amid a growing number of doubts about the Christian faith, I'm usually not surprised. I'm sad, but not shocked. In a secular age, I expect people of different faiths and those who claim no faith at all to wrestle with various questions and doubts. It's less surprising to me when someone succumbs to the subtle pull of secularism than when people maintain a firm conviction that their religion is true, not merely helpful.

This kind of departure from the church often follows months (or years) of asking serious questions. I'm always heartened to see church members asking good questions about what they believe. Far too many Christians through the ages have sought to maintain the engine of faith on the fumes of their father and mother's devotion, never

wrestling with questions about not only *what* they believe but *why*. Far be it from me to chastise anyone else for pushing and prodding those areas of Christianity that cause them anxiety. Examining pressure points does not indicate one's faith is weak, but that *the* faith is strong—solid enough to withstand such inquiry.

Unfortunately, some go beyond wrestling with questions and doubts in order to better grasp and fully own their faith; they arrive at a “deconstruction” phase. Christianity no longer seems plausible. They reject teachings they once believed. Sometimes, they admit there are aspects of their faith journey they will miss, and so they wonder if a “newly revised” faith will permit them to maintain some semblance of what they had before. They are confident whatever Christianity they'd adopt after a period of deconstruction would be a better, more compelling version—a faith more “workable” for the times we live in. But for now, at least, they're not invested in revising the faith or seeking a new kind of Christianity at all; instead, they opt for fulfillment in other spiritual avenues that may offer purpose and meaning without requiring the affirmation of certain doctrines or adherence to a moral code.

Perhaps you're in a season of questioning, or have even arrived at a moment when “deconstruction” best describes your current state. I'd like to be upfront about three things in response.

First, whenever I address those who describe their faith journey in this way, I remain committed to doing my best to persuade them of the truth and beauty of Christianity, because I hold on to the hope that a reconstructed faith on the other side of this journey of doubt can be stronger and more vibrant than anything they've experienced so far.

Second, a reconstructed faith will require recovering Christian orthodoxy, not departing from it. Let me put it this way: recovering your faith will include recovering *the* faith, not altering Christian words like “love” and “grace” and “mercy” by filling them with meanings derived from contemporary culture.

Third, no matter how long friends remain in a state of disbelief in the gospel and disobedience to the Lord, I remain devoted to them and their wellbeing—and that's why I pray they'd be haunted by the

Jesus of the Gospels until they are mesmerized by his power and love, taken with his beauty, and yearn to once again belong to his people.

TWO CATEGORIES OF DOUBT

Many of the most common doubts and struggles seem to fall into two categories, with some overlap between them. The first set focuses on the *veracity* of Christian teaching: *Is Christianity true?* It's easy to find some of Christianity's truth claims implausible. Can we really believe that Jesus was born of a virgin, that the miracles we read about in the Old and New Testaments truly occurred, and that the enchanted world of the Bible is a better description of reality than the scientific world of natural laws we experience every day? So many Christian stories—and doctrines like the full deity and full humanity of Christ—seem out of touch, irrelevant, or farfetched.

The second set of doubts focuses on the *goodness* of Christian teaching: *Is Christianity good?* As people scan Christianity's record over the centuries and see the wreckage left by many who've done atrocious things in Jesus's name, they grow unsettled with religious certainty that could lead to more acts of violence and unjust discrimination. Can we really believe the church is a force for good in the world when so many tragedies can be traced back to its members? Some aspects of Christianity's moral vision, in particular the commands regarding sexuality and marriage, seem backward and unworkable—the Bible's moral aspirations unattainable.

At first when you encounter doubts, you may try to salvage a Christian identity that remains true to at least one of the sets. Perhaps you think you can hold on to the foundational truth claims of Christianity—the resurrection of Jesus, for instance, or other statements found in the Apostles' Creed—and still remake and revise the moral vision of Christianity so that it better corresponds to contemporary notions of goodness and freedom. Or maybe you think you can focus on a renewed moral vision that includes all the teachings of Christianity that resonate with you—loving your neighbor as yourself, showing grace to the outcast, the stranger, even your enemy—while downplaying or reinterpreting some of the miracle stories that feel embarrassing in an age of technological advance. Many people want

to maintain *something* resembling Christianity, since they believe religions are good when they provide us with purpose and make us kinder and more decent to others. But such attempts to keep part of Christianity without the whole, or to revise it according to our preferences, only leaves us unsatisfied.

MY REASONS FOR HOPE

This brings us to what many describe as their deconstruction. Some in this state will say that they've not written off Christianity for good. Still, they believe it no longer accurate to describe themselves as Christian. Questions and doubts prohibit them from identifying with historic Christianity. Perhaps this is where you are as you read this chapter. While this news always saddens me, I have hope that your Christian faith can be recovered. Here's why.

First, I admire anyone who has the integrity to give up the fruitless pursuit of molding and changing the Christian faith into an identity that better suits them, no matter how distant it may be from orthodoxy. Using the language of deconstruction rightly acknowledges that whatever spirituality someone may still claim, it's not historic Christianity. To claim a Christian identity while holding non-Christian beliefs would be intellectually dishonest—both for you and for other Christians.

Second, I'm heartened by anyone who has tenacity in asking questions and searching for answers. What's more, even though you realize that this deconversion has cost you friendships and relationships, you seem committed to following the truth wherever it may lead. In some church contexts, it would be far easier to suppress questions and shut down doubts than to risk the crisis of identity that comes from wrestling with deep matters of faith.

Third, if you describe yourself as deconstructed and yet remain committed to asking questions, I have hope that in your continual pursuit of truth the Holy Spirit will bring clarity and illumination to you. If not for the Holy Spirit, there would be no hope of *anyone* continuing in the faith, myself included, so I don't place my hopes for your recovery of Christianity in yourself, your questions, or (certainly

not!) my answers, but in the Spirit whose work is essential in opening eyes and hearts to the beauty of Jesus and the love of his people.

ASK MORE QUESTIONS

How, though, should I respond to deconversion, to the doubts and questions that have now overwhelmed someone's Christian identity? You might expect me to tell you simply to "have faith," to set aside these doubts and take a leap: believe something to be true before you're convinced of its veracity or goodness. But this response makes the Christian faith seem too disconnected from tough questions.

No, the last thing I'd want you to do is to suppress your questions and squelch your doubts. Instead, I hope you'll discover *more* questions and entertain *more* doubts. You heard me right. You need to doubt more. You need to question more.

To be fair in your pursuit of truth, you should take those doubts and questions that you, with laser-like focus, have trained on Christianity and point them at the story you've adopted for yourself. Until now, your faith in yourself and in deconstruction has escaped the level of intense scrutiny that you put your earlier Christian faith through. If you truly deconstruct in a way that is authentic and honest, then your newfound faith must undergo the same level of examination as your older faith.

Here's what I mean. Let's start with the first set of doubts you may have entertained—those that concern the *truthfulness* of Christianity. Apply them to yourself. What reasons do you have for believing that your doubts come from a neutral and honest heart? What if you are not the dispassionate pursuer of "facts" you perceive yourself to be, but are instead shaped by assumptions and presuppositions you've never challenged? Do you believe all religious claims to truth are relative? If so, why? What evidence do you have for seeing the world only in natural terms? How does your current cultural environment make this way of life seem plausible to you? Is it possible you've merely traded one set of unproven assumptions for another?

In the same way, scrutinize your questions about the *goodness* of Christianity. Who determines goodness? Where do you get that sense of goodness? Could it be that the measures by which you judge the in-

adequacies of the church are the standards the church has bequeathed to you? Take those doubts you have about Christianity and point them back to your own heart. What if the questions you have about the goodness of Christianity are rooted in a desire to justify yourself, to showcase your goodness, to change places with God so that you're the one with the gavel?

Perhaps you're puzzled by my description of your "newfound faith." You may have grown so accustomed to thinking in terms of deconstruction that you'd rather say that you now have no faith at all, or that you are spiritual in a broad and vague sense instead of in a particular way. But I don't believe you are faithless. Your faith has merely shifted—away from God and his Word and toward yourself and the story you've crafted, in which you now find meaning and significance. Your sense of belonging has shifted also—away from the people of God who confess faith in and allegiance to Jesus, and toward people who affirm your deconversion. You've been conditioned by your cultural context and your new community to see doubt as courageous. Instead of finding your identity and purpose within the story of the Bible, you have adopted a faith that follows the contours of the Enlightenment's story of the world: *There once was a time when you believed in superstition and religious dogma, but now you've dared to strike out on your own, reject the faith of the dark ages of your past, free yourself from your church, and become the hero who makes your own way in life.*

Make no mistake: you're still on a faith journey; it's just that the way you tell your story has changed. Will *that* story receive as much scrutiny as the Christian story you've rejected? Will your new community be held to the same standards as your old community? Will your *self* receive as much critical examination as your Savior did?

Until thinkers ask more questions of their deconstruction, I believe they are trading faiths—merely accepting (on faith) a new story that gives meaning and significance to their life. They've not yet put their new assumptions under the microscope. For example, why do people accept the idea that it's broad-minded to reject miracles in favor of a naturalistic view of the world, when the *Christian* mind is broad enough to believe in both natural laws and supernatural intervention? Or why do some believe it right to reject certain aspects of Christianity's moral teaching when the basis for their rejection relies

on other aspects of Christianity's moral vision—a worldview that has so permeated our societal norms and expectations that we don't even notice it?

Remember, there is always more going on in our hearts and minds than we understand. Christianity can withstand rigorous examination of its truth and goodness. The question is: can your newfound faith, as expressed in your deconversion story, withstand the same level of interrogation? You are no longer sure about the *God* of Christianity; are you sure of the *self* you place at the center of your deconversion story?

RETAINING AN OPEN MIND

As you submit your story and your new beliefs to new sets of questions, I hope you'll keep an open mind toward the teachings of Christianity you once adhered to. If you do, I believe you'll find you resonate more with the fundamental tenets of Christianity than you might expect. So many deconstruction stories replace the cosmic drama of good and evil—with the cross and resurrection of Christ at the center of a number of life-giving, marvelous paradoxes—with the individual quest to self-discovery. The pursuit of the self, however, leads to an emptier and shallower life, a road toward nothingness—something far removed from the blessed vision described by Christianity and a true union with God that overwhelms yet never obliterates our unique personalities. Over and over again, doctrines that may seem distasteful or implausible in our day may surprise you.

Take, for example, the idea that all human beings are marked by sinfulness—that we are not basically good but basically evil. That's hard to swallow by many today who find it more dignifying to think of humanity as basically good, with the propensity for corruption and mistakes. But what if *this* doctrine, as difficult as it may sound, proves to be a great equalizing force that puts the prince at the same moral level as the pauper, and issues the call of repentance to all people regardless of rank or status or prestige? Another example: the belief that a good God created the world and made humans in his image, so that all of us have dignity and value and bear moral responsibility. That idea makes little sense to a world in which matter is all there is, or a society in which people scoff at the idea that a divine Judge

would hold us accountable for our actions. But what if this doctrine, challenging as it may be, provides the basis for believing in human rights and treating others with dignity, while the secular view must admit that commitment to “human rights” is grounded in nothing more than a useful fiction that helps society to function?

RECOVERING ORTHODOXY

It’s not surprising that, in a secular age, people wrestle with doubts and questions. We are always tempted to challenge the constraints of orthodoxy at the pressure points where we most *need* the constraints of orthodoxy. In every culture and in every age, parts of Christianity seem implausible. Aspects of orthodoxy seem strange. *Truth* is strange. We didn’t invent it. Fiction makes more sense. Heresy always seems reasonable. Deconstruction appeals to us because it launches a new faith that better suits the story we want to tell about ourselves.

Christianity, however, is more alive than we are. This faith refuses to embrace our error, no matter how sincerely held, and insists instead on keeping us from error, by believing in the ultimate triumph of truth. Deconstruction binds us to the movement of the current moment; Christianity frees us from slavery to the present day.

That’s why I encourage you to do what is truly “provocative” and “daring”—not to ask more questions of Christianity or your former church, but to turn those questions upon yourself. In an age when people believe they can pick and choose which parts of any religion to adhere to, it’s truly astounding when someone submits to truth beyond themselves and their changing intuitions.

DIFFERENT STORY

That’s why, if you are in a state of deconstruction, I hope you’ll reconsider Christianity as you commit to asking more questions. You’ve interrogated your faith; now is the time to interrogate yourself. And as you do so, remember this: the Jesus whose words and actions changed the world—who leaps from the pages of the Gospels into our hearts and minds, the incomparable figure who bursts out of any box we’d put him in and breaks the chains of every cultural expectation—this

Jesus loves doubters. He told Thomas he is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, but when Thomas couldn't and wouldn't believe, Jesus gave him a close-up of his scars of love.

Jesus is alive. He continues to surprise people today, and I pray he'll surprise you. And I hope that one day, maybe soon, you'll look back and see how God used this season of deconversion in a manner similar to the way a broken limb can actually wind up stronger and more fortified at the very place the break occurred. Broken limbs, deconstruction stories—neither of these is good, but Jesus is all about bringing good things from bad. He can resurrect life from the grave of a buried faith. I can't wait to read the next chapter in your story.

**‘PROGRESSIVE’
CHRISTIANITY WAS
EVEN SHALLOWER THAN
THE EVANGELICAL
FAITH I LEFT**

IAN HARBER

In John 6, Jesus’s hard teaching causes a large number of his followers to abandon him. After they leave, Jesus asks his remaining disciples, “Do you want to go away as well?” (v. 67). Peter, whom I assume is heartbroken and embarrassed from seeing so many he knows leave

the one he calls Lord, speaks up: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God” (vv. 68–69).

This story is my story. I have walked in both shoes: the shoes of those who deserted and the shoes of Peter who couldn’t leave, no matter how hard it seemed to stay. I was an #exvangelical who left the faith of my youth for “progressive Christianity.” Then I returned. Here’s my #revangelical story.

HOW MY FAITH CRUMBLLED

The Christian tradition I grew up in—for all the wonderful things it gave me—was not prepared for a generation of kids with access to high-speed internet. Not that the critiques of the Bible we discovered online were new, but they were now at the fingertips of curious folks who grew up in evangelical bubbles. Like me. The answers given in church seemed shallow compared to the legitimate critiques that were a Google search or YouTube video away. *What about the contradictions and scientific inaccuracies in certain biblical stories? How have we ever shrugged at the passages in which God commands Israel to slaughter her enemies and their children? How could a loving God condemn his beloved creation to eternal torment? What about all the other religions? Aren’t they all saying basically the same thing?* These questions, among others, began to chip away at the authority of the stories I was handed as a child.

Not only did I have questions about the Bible, but I had questions about how it squared with my faith’s political culture. *Why did our policies seem to particularly disadvantage poor and marginalized communities? Why was it common in the church to see Christians degrade immigrants, made in the image of God, who were simply seeking a better life in my Texas town? As important as abortion is, surely we’re supposed to care about those suffering after birth as well, right?*

I couldn’t help but think it had to be more complicated than the story I was being told.

So eventually, I left the faith completely. I wanted nothing to do with Jesus or the church.

Interestingly, it was in a time of mourning—when I learned that my mother, from whom I had been estranged, had died at 33 (I was

16)—that God began to reenter my life. But my evangelical environment lacked a substantial theology of suffering. Suffering was something to avoid or suppress, not a means of God’s transforming grace in our lives.

This triangle of questions—about Scripture, politics, and suffering—laid the foundation for me to explore progressive Christianity.

DECONSTRUCTION WITHOUT RECONSTRUCTION

I read Rob Bell’s books *Velvet Elvis* and *Love Wins*. I read Donald Miller’s *Blue Like Jazz*. I still remember the paragraph from *Blue Like Jazz* that opened me up to a world of grace I hadn’t experienced—but also to a world freed from orthodox doctrine. As a fan of Michael Gungor, I began listening to his newly launched podcast, *The Liturgists*.

The views I encountered were thrilling. Science did not have to be discarded because of the Bible! When prayer felt like a coin toss, mysticism provided a new way to encounter the divine! Faith could inspire politics that included care for marginalized groups! Most important, in hearing Michael Gungor and “Science Mike” McHargue’s stories of deconstruction, I heard my story. I found people who understood what it was like to deconstruct your faith and have to rebuild it from scratch.

But then I ran into a problem. As I kept listening and reading, I realized I didn’t have the tools to rebuild—and I wasn’t receiving any from these voices. Every belief I held had been neatly disassembled and laid bare on the floor for examination. But there was no guidance for putting something back together. Helping people deconstruct their faith without also helping put it back together again is lazy, irresponsible, dangerous, and isolating. The goal of deconstruction should be greater faithfulness to Jesus, not mere self-discovery or signaling one’s virtue.

As *The Liturgists’* journeys progressed, they fell in increasing lockstep with the progressive platform of the political Left. It reminded me of the conformity of conservative Christians to whatever the Republican Party told them to believe. When the 2016 election ended, I had a strange experience. I shared the progressives’ concern for the country, but I also saw them using the same litmus tests that the con-

servative evangelicals of my youth had used—just now on the other side of the aisle. Now, if you held to a historic Christian sexual ethic, you were a backward bigot. If you considered abortion morally wrong, you were anti-woman.

Progressives had become just as fundamentalist as the fundamentalists they despised. Only now, instead of the litmus test being traditional values, it was wokeness. If you didn't tow the party line of progressive orthodoxy, you were an outcast. A heretic.

'PROGRESSIVE' BRAND. SAME OLD SUPERFICIAL PITCH.

I'd heard about the dangers of moralistic therapeutic deism (MTD), the default American religion in which God simply wants you to live a decent life, not be sad, and he doesn't intrude on your life. I originally ran to progressive Christianity to counter that kind of shallow belief. But what I found was more of the same, only with new definitions.

Wokeness was the new morality. Therapy was the new path to happiness. Cancel culture was the new church discipline. And like MTD, there was, conveniently, no personal God to place demands on your life in any meaningful way. In this "progressive" MTD, Elizabeth Gilbert's trope is the only thing left: "God dwells within you, as you." There's no way to distinguish between ourselves and God. In this paradigm, we *are* God.

I'm not anti-woke or anti-therapy. Systemic injustice is real, and we need some of the conversations that wokeness has brought us. I was in therapy for almost two years while in college, and I think it can benefit many of us. But in the end, these do not replace the eternal love of the triune God.

Mark Sayers describes the progressive vision of the world as "the kingdom without the King." We want all of God's blessings—without submitting to his loving rule and reign. We want progress—without his presence. We want justice—without his justification. We want the horizontal implications of the gospel for society—without the vertical reconciliation of sinners with God. We want society to conform to our standard of moral purity—without God's standard of personal holiness.

JOURNEY BACK TO ORTHODOX FAITH

After the 2016 election I became convinced it was time to begin rebuilding my faith. A few months later, two things happened simultaneously: I began formal theological education and, in a tragic accident, I lost the grandfather who had raised me. This death plunged me into another season of intense suffering, but this time in a theologically rigorous environment.

One of my teachers said, “We do theology in the light so we can stand on it in the dark.” I was doing theology *and* standing on it in the dark. For the first time I really learned the doctrines of the Trinity and of Scripture as a unified story, and how to read it as inspired literature. I was taught how doctrines that I assumed were contradictory—like penal substitution and Christus Victor—actually need each other to form the full, beautiful, biblical picture. I learned about union with Christ and all the blessings it brings. I learned about spiritual disciplines and the life-giving freedom that flows from a disciplined pursuit of God. From there, the wide and rich world of historic Christian orthodoxy swung open for me to explore.

We need *more* theology, nuance, grace, compassion, and understanding in our churches, not less. But these things are made possible *by* orthodox doctrine, not in spite of it. Doubt and questions need not catalyze a pendulum swing from belief to unbelief. If worked out in a healthy, thoughtful Christian community—and with an abiding connection to Christ, our true vine (John 15)—they can actually deepen faith and strengthen roots, producing a life where we bear fruit and withstand the fierce winds of a secular age.

If you’re reading this, there’s a chance you have begun the process of deconstruction in one way or another. Maybe it’s questions about science or confusion around suffering. Maybe it’s a slew of difficult passages in the Bible that don’t square with your picture of God. Maybe it’s frustration with the political status quo. But for one reason or another, you’re pulling apart the building blocks of a faith you once took for granted but now wonder if there’s any truth to. If that is where you are today, I understand. And as you begin this journey of reexamining your faith, there are three things I would like you to hear.

First, I'm grieved there are not more places where you can feel safe with your doubts and questions. Your doubts and questions deserve to be searched out and taken seriously. Too many churches have dismissed reasonable questions as a slippery slope to atheism. I cannot promise that your questions will be met with grace and good faith where you are, and that saddens me.

However, don't let one church experience—or even two or three—represent the totality of all churches. Even if it seems the people around you cannot hold the weight of your doubts and questions, plenty of churches out there *will* treat you, and your doubts, with the intellectual patience and respect you deserve. Moreover, saints throughout church history can help. And even more so, God can. Don't give up on the faith because one church gave up on you.

Second, you might be thinking I want you to stop deconstructing—to turn around and stay exactly where you are—but that would be wrong. Keep going. Parts of your faith probably *do* need to be deconstructed. Your legitimate questions *do* need to be addressed. These need not be steps away from faith, but steps toward a deeper and lasting faith. Don't stuff these questions down and hope they go away. Don't settle for less than the good, true, and beautiful found in Jesus Christ.

In your deconstruction, you will likely encounter teachings about God that you haven't heard before, that resonate in a way you haven't felt before, and that promise an "Ultimate Reality" freed from the pages of an ancient book. And while that promise sounds nice, I can tell you firsthand that it only leads to more confusion, exhaustion, and inconsistencies.

I'd contend that your problem isn't with God or Jesus or even the Bible; it's that no one has showed you the riches contained in Christ and mined through a careful study of Scripture. A teacher never went into the storeroom and brought out treasures old and new. Instead, you were handed a "believe it or leave it" theology that left little room for growth and grace.

There is more to Christ than meets the eye. He's like a treasure hidden in a field (Matt. 13:44-46). A man found the treasure and sold everything he had to buy the field, just so he could have the treasure.

You're going to have to dig, and perhaps sell what you have, to reach the treasure. But the treasure is so precious, it's worth it.

Third, as you deconstruct, you'll likely encounter the world of mysticism. You'll be told that God is a vague mystery, not something we can truly know. You'll hear that, instead of trying to have all the right answers like those staunch fundamentalists, you should embrace the mystery and strive to touch the divine.

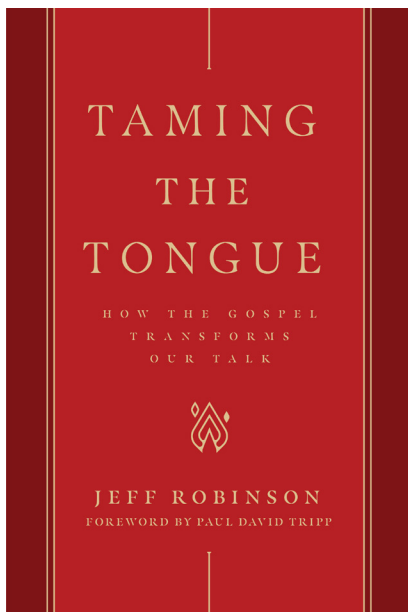
Don't buy that false dichotomy. There is more than enough room in the historic Christian tradition and biblical witness for the mystery of God. In this life, we see through a glass dimly (1 Cor. 13:12). We'll never have all the answers. There are things we will get wrong. And yet God will still love us even as we miss the mark.

But don't let this truth blind you to another glorious truth: that this mysterious, transcendent God has made himself known. His heart has always been—from the first page of the Bible to the last—to dwell with his people in never-ending joy. While God is high and above all things, he's also intimately involved in our lives and our world. And while you'll never know everything or find answers to every single question, you can still know him. Not in an impersonal "God is in all things so just be aware of him" kind of way. But as a friend, comforter, coworker, shepherd, and even Father. Yes, God is a mystery. But he can also be known. He is known in Jesus. He is known in the pages of Scripture. And when we seek him with all of our heart, we will find him.

Everyone's faith journey is winding and complex. But God is God, and he lays out a path so we can find him, even when we've wandered from what's familiar. There are more paths than ever before in today's world—more options for spiritual "enlightenment" or custom faith. But no path leads to true happiness and everlasting life except "Jesus alone" (John 14:6), which is narrower than we might like (Matt. 7:13) but more satisfying than we can imagine (Ps. 16:11).

In my journey I discovered, with Peter, that God's "divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence" (2 Pet. 1:3). In Christ, we have everything we need. Why leave the boundaries of faith "once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 1:3) in order to find life? Jesus has the words of life. He *is* life, the truth, and the way. Where else would we go?

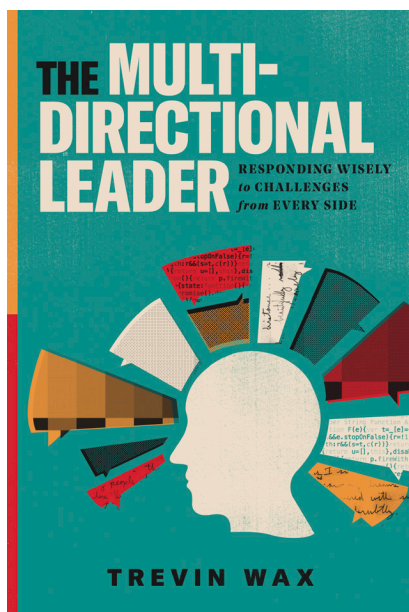
ANOTHER TGC PUBLICATION



“This book hit home with me, perhaps because some of my greatest regrets have come from ways I’ve misused words—confidences I didn’t keep, criticism I was too eager to offer, bragging to make myself seem important, dominating the conversation when I should have listened. I’ve also misused words by keeping silent when I should have come clean, when I should have offered praise, when I should have spoken up. These and many more insights on how we use our words are covered in this brief but wisdom-filled book—a great book to read prayerfully on your own, but even better to use to discuss with a small group.”

NANCY GUTHRIE, author and Bible teacher

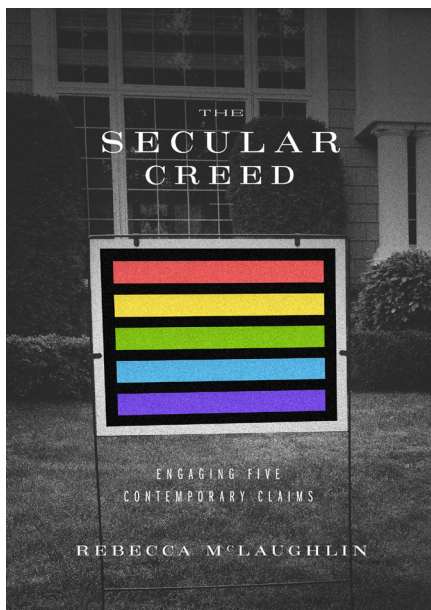
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“Trevin Wax writes with keenness of insight, pastoral wisdom, and prophetic forcefulness. In this book he articulates the pressure today’s Christian leaders feel from every direction. Wax remains one of my most reliable counselors for leading in a rapidly shifting context.”

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“In this book, Rebecca McLaughlin offers a gentle, yet powerful biblical corrective that calls readers to holistic Christian love—a higher calling than the call of the culture, and, often, a harder calling. She examines popular cultural mantras and answers each one with the truth and application of the gospel of Christ. In her balanced and gracious approach, she paints our culture’s arguments in the most compassionate light possible—and then shows the beauty of a more excellent way!”

JASMINE HOLMES, author of *Mother to Son: Letters to a Black Boy on Identity and Hope*



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