

*IAN HARBER*

*FOREWORD BY GAVIN ORTLUND*

**WALKING**

**THROUGH**



**DECONSTRUCTION**

*HOW TO BE A COMPANION  
IN A CRISIS OF FAITH*



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# INTRODUCTION

**RAISED IN THE CHURCH**, I was always in trouble. But I wasn't in trouble because of my behavior. In fact, I was mostly well-behaved when all was said and done. No, it was my *questions* that always found me trouble.

I followed the rules in the conservative evangelical church I grew up attending and tried to live a godly life as best as I knew how. But as I grew and encountered new ideas and perspectives, I began to question my beliefs. I grappled with issues like the concept of hell, the treatment of women and immigrants in the church, the problem of evil, science, and more. Ultimately, I found that my faith couldn't provide the answers I was seeking.

So, I left my faith as I knew it behind. The voices I discovered spoke of faith in an open and inclusive manner, or so it seemed to me. They embraced science, supported those marginalized by society, and believed that, in the end, everyone is saved. My media consumption spurred my deconstruction. I listened to podcasts like *The Liturgists* and watched countless hours of talks from Pete Rollins, Rob Bell, Richard Rohr, and many more. I all but dropped out of church and replaced my pastors with podcasters. I stopped trusting those who knew me in real life—my struggles, my propensities, my sorrows—and only trusted those who delivered spiritual goods to me in the form of MP3s and WAV files.

I still identified as a Christian for most of my deconstruction, talked about Jesus and the Bible, and even worked in ministry for a while. Still, my beliefs were no longer recognizably Christian. Jesus wasn't the only path. He didn't physically rise from the dead. There was no call for personal salvation. The Bible didn't hold authority in the way I had once believed. I deconstructed my faith until almost nothing substantive remained.

I wonder if this story resonates with you. Do you know someone with a similar journey? Or maybe you can relate to it yourself? This narrative of deconstruction is becoming increasingly prevalent among those raised in the church. The term *deconstruction* has gained traction in recent years and seems to be everywhere now. It's causing rifts in churches, families, and friendships, as individuals who once shared a faith now find themselves divided. Some remain steadfast in their beliefs, while others, like me, unravel their faith due to doubts, questions, and critical concerns.

Let me share a few more parts of my story. Though I grew up in a loving home, I was raised by my grandparents. My mother struggled with addiction her whole life. My grandparents were incredible, but my grandmother was diagnosed with cancer when I was young and passed away the day after Christmas when I was thirteen. A few years later, my mother took her own life. Between those two funerals, I attended ten others for various other friends and family members. Fast-forward to the year after my wedding, when my grandfather passed away in a plane crash accident. Death has been on my doorstep my entire life.

In my youth group, a mentor who had laid the foundation of my faith and even baptized me went on to sexually abuse multiple friends of mine. Despite having a compassionate youth pastor (not the same person who abused my friends), the church I attended was rigid, legalistic, and often promoted partisan politics from the pulpit. The Christian school I went to ostracized me for asking questions, wrestling with my faith, and trying to figure things out. Another church

I was a part of caused tremendous pain in my life through betrayal and rejection.

Given all this, can you fault me for having questions? For feeling that the church couldn't address my deepest needs? Even if my journey led me to unhelpful places, it's understandable why I sought anything I could find to make sense of the pain I endured. After a tumultuous upbringing and attending churches with their own sets of challenges, I deconstructed my faith. For many years, my faith was barely hanging on.

It took nearly a decade, but eventually my faith reconstructed. It was through seeking out a theological education in another local church, where my questions were accepted, the Bible was opened, the riches of church history were taught, and genuine discipleship was modeled, and through the grace of God—which met me in a dark season of my life—that I was able to find a foundation for my faith. It was through landing at a church with people who genuinely cared, after experiencing significant pain from a church I had trusted, that I learned the importance of the local church.

Today, my faith is stronger than ever. I don't have all the answers, but I've gained something even better: a *settled trust in the Lord*. I stand as evidence that walking through deconstruction can lead to a more robust, renewed faith. But that's not the outcome for everyone.

A few years back, I shared my journey of deconstruction and reconstruction in an article for The Gospel Coalition.<sup>1</sup> The response—both support and criticism—was overwhelming. Many related to my story, while others felt threatened by its honesty or by the fact that despite years of deconstruction, I'm still a Christian who adheres to the historic orthodox tradition.<sup>2</sup> This made me reflect not just on my own journey but on the process of deconstruction as a whole. As I pondered my experience and the discussions surrounding deconstruction, I realized that many people were touching on various facets of it but missing the bigger picture.

The term *deconstruction* has come to have many meanings, leading to lots of confusion about what it is and isn't. It's become a word with

a negative connotation because its definition is so ambiguous. I believe we need clarity, not to confine anyone or gatekeep an experience, but to understand and minister to those truly going through it. Lots of books are being written about deconstruction right now. Most of the books I have seen have been written by pastors, professors, or writers for people who are in the process of deconstructing—and some of them are very good! We need these books to be written. But what about from the opposite direction? From someone who has deconstructed and reconstructed their faith writing *to the church* and *for the church*. Plenty of angry exvangelicals have written their tell-all memoirs railing against the failures of the church. Plenty of fundamentalists have written to warn people about the dangers of deconstruction. What I hope to do in this book is *serve* the church in this crucial ministry as someone who has been deeply hurt by the church and wonderfully healed by Jesus through the ministry of the local church.

This book could never have been written if I hadn't gone through deconstruction—but this book isn't about me. This book is about you and the people you love and minister to who are deconstructing their faith. I imagine you are coming to this book with lots of questions. What is deconstruction? What causes it? What is the experience like? How can we help people who are deconstructing? Is there anything we can do to make deconstruction less intense and prevalent in our churches? These are the topics that this book sets out to address.

## WHO IS DECONSTRUCTING?

If you're reading this book, someone you know is probably deconstructing. Whether it's someone in your church, a friend, a child, a parent, a coworker, or someone else you care about, they are wrestling with their faith in a significant way that might scare you. Regardless of any statistics or trends, that person is the most important one to you.

It's easy to write something like deconstruction off as a trend that all the cool kids are doing just because it seems to be everywhere these days. Whenever you bring up deconstruction being trendy,

you'll rightly receive some visceral pushback from those who are experiencing it because, to them, there is nothing trendy about it. I hope it will become clear why that is in the first few chapters of this book.

Deconstruction isn't a *trendy* thing to do, but it is a *trend* that is happening at scale in our country and passing from person to person. Anecdotally, when I look up various hashtags on TikTok, the views on deconstruction content are through the roof. As of the time of writing this book, I see 1 billion views on #deconstruction, 85.5 million views on #deconstructiontiktok, 61.2 million views on #progressive-christianity, 17.5 million views on #deconstructionjourney, 1.1 million views on #deconstructiongrief. There is nothing particularly scientific about looking up views on some hashtags on a social media platform, but what it *does* indicate is that deconstruction is in the digital air. At a minimum, people are being algorithmically served content about deconstruction all the time. They are exposed to people's deconversion stories and challenges to the faith in ways that are historically unprecedented. The algorithm isn't going to wait for your Bible study.

But thankfully, reliable quantitative research around this has brought some helpful insights to light. Jim Davis, Michael Graham, and Ryan Burge have released the largest study ever done on dechurched in America in their book *The Great Dechurched: Who's Leaving, Why Are They Going, and What Will It Take to Bring Them Back?* Forty million Americans have left the church over the last twenty-five years. It's the largest religious shift in American history—and it's *away* from the church.<sup>3</sup>

The reality is that not everyone who has dechurched has deconstructed—not even most of them. The authors profile five different types of people who have dechurched, and they split the five profiles into two groups: the casually dechurched and the dechurched casualties. The casually dechurched are those who left the church for casual reasons: they got too busy, they moved and never found a new church, they stopped going to church during the Covid-19 pandemic and never went back, and so on.<sup>4</sup> The other group, dechurched casualties,

make up about ten million adult Americans who have “permanently, purposefully exited evangelicalism.”<sup>5</sup> These are the people who have left the church because of real, negative experiences they have had in the church. My book is about the dechurched casualties.

According to the study, these dechurched casualties—who the authors call exvangelicals—are 82 percent white, 13 percent black, and 2 percent Hispanic. They’re 65 percent female and 35 percent male. Maybe most surprisingly, the average age is fifty-four years old. What the study shows is that the average exvangelical is a white, Gen X female who didn’t feel like they fit in with their church, didn’t feel loved, found it inconvenient to attend, had negative experiences, and disagreed with the politics and beliefs of their church.<sup>6</sup> This may or may not describe the person you know who is deconstructing. But I would bet it describes the progressive voices they’re listening to in their deconstruction journey.

There’s something else to keep in mind: these people in the study are the ones who have *already* left the church and have no intention of ever coming back. They are *not* the people who are still in the church wrestling through whether they’re going to remain Christian and stay in the church. We have no reason to believe the trajectory of dechurching will reverse any time soon. As people are exposed to media and peers that challenge their faith and are raised in the homes of those who have left the church, we’re going to see more and more people deconstructing their faith in the years—and maybe decades—to come.

Some will point out that what we need to help people in their deconstruction is more apologetics. Apologetics can be a good thing. We need to be able to speak intelligently about our faith. But apologetics without love, without character, without personal integrity, without a gracious and compassionate heart is nothing more than a clanging cymbal (1 Corinthians 13:1-3). Having answers is good; having love is better. “What matters is faith working through love” (Galatians 5:6).

## THE PATH OF DECONSTRUCTION AND RECONSTRUCTION

In this book, I walk you through the path of deconstruction and reconstruction. Part one of the book is all about deconstruction: we define what deconstruction is and isn't, as well as what catalyzes deconstruction (chapter one); situate deconstruction in the Christian life (chapter two); describe the existential experience of deconstruction (chapter three); look at how deconstruction affects our beliefs (chapter four); see how the church plays a role in deconstruction (chapter five); identify how sin and cultural pressures create a weak sense of identity that contributes to deconstruction (chapter six); and examine the potential outcomes of deconstruction (chapter seven).

My goal isn't to make you deconstruct your faith, but to help you understand why others are deconstructing theirs. I want to warn you, though, that it is a difficult journey. You might encounter some things that offend you and other things that cause you to question. It can be a painful process, but there's no healing without first acknowledging and understanding the brokenness. Whether you feel a deep resonance or repulsion with the journey of deconstruction, I ask that you read it while keeping in mind the person you know who is deconstructing, opening your heart wide to them and asking God to help you see them in this process.

Don't worry, I won't leave you at the bottom of deconstruction. Part two of the book focuses on reconstruction. The truth is that we can't control someone's reconstruction. What we *can* do is create environments—both in our interpersonal relationships and in our churches—that help minimize the *intensity* of someone's deconstruction by being a non-anxious presence, creating healthy relationships and churches full of trust and care, and having a more robust understanding of our faith to talk through with them.

To that end, we look at how we can handle our relationships (chapter eight), how God uses our suffering (chapter nine), how we

hold our beliefs (chapter ten), how we view the Christian life (chapter eleven), and how we can create healthy churches (chapter twelve). Finally, we gaze at God himself to see his goodness and beauty (chapter thirteen).

Everyone's deconstruction story is unique to them. Sure, there are commonalities and contours that many share, but you can't assume everyone who says "I'm deconstructing my faith" is doing so for the exact same reason. That makes writing a book like this a difficult task. How do you describe something that is so personal? Inevitably there will be a point where the shoe simply doesn't fit.

With that in mind, I'd like to give you a tip for reading this book. Instead of reading this book as a comprehensive explanation for every individual deconstruction story, read it more like a puzzle where each individual chapter is a piece of the puzzle. The goal is to develop a clearer picture of the person you know who is deconstructing and how to best love them and minister to them. Some pieces fit better than others. Some pieces only fit in specific places. Other pieces go with an entirely different puzzle and simply don't belong. Maybe one chapter doesn't apply at all and another chapter is a bull's-eye. Some chapters will feel more or less relevant depending on who you have in mind. What is most relevant might change over time. That's okay.

Deconstruction is a messy and complicated process. My hope is that you are equipped for all kinds of different situations at the end of this book. Our goal is to faithfully walk alongside our loved ones who are deconstructing their faith and surrender ourselves as an instrument in God's hands, praying for the renewal of their faith.

As we start on this journey, I'll make two promises to you: this book will be *brutally honest* yet *defiantly hopeful*. If you think we can ignore the problems in American evangelicalism, part one of this book will be a rude awakening. If you think I'm down and out on Jesus, the church, and living a faithful Christian life, part two of this book will surprise you with the amount of hope that I truly have.

The missionary Lesslie Newbigin is often attributed with saying, “I am neither an optimist nor a pessimist; Jesus Christ is risen from the dead!” I hope to capture that sentiment in this book. Jesus Christ has risen indeed, and nothing—no doubt, scandal, leader, church, or culture—can separate us from his love.

*PART 1*

# DECONSTRUCT





# DEFINING DECONSTRUCTION

**“I’M DECONSTRUCTING MY FAITH.”** Perhaps someone has said this to you recently. A friend, child, spouse, parent, coworker, or congregant. You don’t really know what they mean, but it doesn’t sound good. Just from the name, you can tell they are taking something apart. If it’s their faith they’re deconstructing, then they must be taking their faith apart. But why?

As you start asking questions, you quickly realize you’ve gotten yourself in over your head. They might start asking questions about the Bible, God, or the church that you’ve never thought about before. Or maybe you have thought about them, but they felt so big that you simply pushed them out of your mind and forgot about them. Maybe it’s something you haven’t thought about since seminary (if you went). They might start talking about large cultural and political issues that seem like they came out of nowhere. They begin accusing the church of doing this or not doing that. “Where is this coming from?” you wonder.

The questions and the accusations that you hear from them put you on edge. You start to feel anxiety well up inside of you. You think of the other popular deconstruction stories that you’ve heard of—Michael Gungor, Joshua Harris, Audrey Assad, and more, none of whom are Christians anymore. Your mind starts racing a hundred

miles per hour. “Are they losing their faith?” “I thought they loved Jesus!” “I wonder if they’re in some kind of sin.” “I’m overwhelmed by all of these questions.” And it all comes down to this one word to describe it: *deconstruction*.

The word *deconstruction* goes back to the philosopher Jacques Derrida, who used it in a technical way to describe the process of “critically reevaluat[ing] the fundamental arrangement and operations of any and all forms of analysis.”<sup>1</sup> If that sounds confusing, that’s because it is. Deconstruction, by its nature, is difficult to describe because it’s a process that deconstructs the very words needed to describe it. But it’s insufficient to say that deconstruction is simply a process of analysis or critique.

Here’s the primary difference: in other forms of analysis or critique, there is typically a method that is followed in order to reach a pre-determined outcome. Think of the scientific method. After observing a phenomenon, you ask questions about it and research existing answers or solutions. If you don’t find any satisfactory answers, you pose a hypothesis, perform a set of experiments to test your hypothesis, and draw conclusions from your experiments about whether your hypothesis has been proven right or wrong.

Deconstruction isn’t like this. There is no set process and no pre-determined conclusion to deconstruction. It’s not a process you decide to undertake to investigate a problem. It’s something you encounter and enter into. The only thing you can do in deconstruction is allow the process to unfold and follow it where it goes.<sup>2</sup> The difference between Derrida’s philosophy of deconstruction and how faith deconstruction is thought about today is that it doesn’t have to last forever. Not only that, but there is precedent for what we now call deconstruction that predates Derrida. More on that later.

It’s only in the last thirty years or so that *deconstruction* really began to describe a particular phenomenon within popular-level evangelical Christianity. Christians started to use the word to describe the process of reexamining their faith to reveal the

contradictions in it and produce something better—at least as they perceived it to be. This became the hallmark of what would eventually be called the Emergent Church.

The Emergent Church was a movement in the early 2000s that was led by pastors and writers such as Doug Pagitt, Brian McLaren, Rob Bell, Peter Rollins, Donald Miller, Mark Driscoll, Richard Rohr, and many more. The Emergent Church started out as an ecclesial project that was searching for ways to reinvent the forms of the church for a postmodern world. But the ecclesial project morphed into a doctrinal project. Instead of simply deconstructing the current ways of doing church, they began deconstructing the core beliefs of the Christian faith. Many (not all) of the names associated with the Emergent movement have either left the faith altogether or redefined it in ways that are beyond recognition.<sup>3</sup>

But something different is happening today. It's related to Derrida's ideas of deconstruction, and it's certainly related to the Emergent Church movement, but there seems to be more going on under this wave of deconstruction than what either of those other two waves were attempting to get at. This latest wave of deconstruction is what this book is attempting to make sense of. What is it? What causes it? What is the experience like? And how can we—as believers who walk with those who are experiencing it, and as believers leading our churches—help them?

## WHAT DECONSTRUCTION ISN'T

There are many narratives surrounding what this wave of deconstruction is and isn't. Most of these narratives are getting at parts of what is going on but miss other aspects that are crucial to it. If we want to understand what deconstruction *is*, then we might want to start by understanding what it *isn't*.

**Asking questions.** One popular narrative is that deconstruction is simply asking questions about your faith. One time, I was getting coffee with a new friend and shared parts of my story with him. I

briefly mentioned how I went through deconstruction. After a while, he came back to it and said, “I want to talk about that. I sometimes have questions about my faith, and I was wondering: Am I deconstructing?” The idea that deconstruction is simply asking questions about your faith raises all kinds of *other* questions.

What about that time when the disciples were physically present at Jesus’ ascension? Matthew records it by saying, “When they saw him, they worshiped, but some doubted” (Matthew 28:17). The eleven disciples had already witnessed three years of Jesus’ ministry, his death, his burial, his miraculous, world-changing, paradigm-shifting resurrection. They had spent forty days with Jesus after his resurrection and were now watching him ascend into heaven, to the right hand of the Father, with their own eyes—and they still somehow doubted. *Is that* deconstruction?

If deconstruction is nothing more than having questions about your faith, you might as well put this book down, because *every* Christian has done that. If that’s true, then there’s no conversation to be had. We’re all deconstructing. End of story. We might as well stop using the word entirely.

There is more going on than that. When we talk to those we know who are deconstructing or we hear the stories of people in our churches, our communities, or online who are deconstructing, we can tell that it’s more than mere questions, but we may not completely grasp what is actually going on.

Deconstruction certainly isn’t *less* than asking questions, but it’s much *more* than that. If we stop there, then we won’t have an adequate understanding of what it is and the experience of going through it. We’ll fail to have a grasp of it and won’t be able to minister to those who are going through it. We’ll fail to create environments that lessen the intensity of people’s deconstruction and fail to aid in their faith flourishing into confident trust in the risen Christ.

***One step toward apostasy.*** The opposite extreme of the asking questions narrative is thinking deconstruction is nothing more than

a brief stop on the way to apostasy. Usually, the people who think of deconstruction in this way have one goal in mind: defending the faith. They want to defend orthodox doctrine, the Bible, and the purity of the church. All of these are good things worth defending. The problem is not in these people's desire to defend the faith but in their posture. They see anyone who questions the faith at all as, at best, problems to be fixed or, at worst, enemies in need of defeat.

They're armed with the weapons of modernist apologetics and are ready to give you rational proofs for intelligent design, the reliability of the Bible, and the bodily resurrection. It's *good* to know why you believe these things and be able to articulate them. But when they are used as weapons against an enemy instead of "a reason for the hope that is in you" (1 Peter 3:15), they become instruments of division instead of testaments to God's glory. By misunderstanding the experience of deconstruction in this way, they turn sincere seekers into formidable foes to be fought in a spiritual war.

Consider this definition of deconstruction by Stand to Reason, a conservative apologetics organization. They define deconstruction this way: "The process of pulling apart undesirable aspects of your Christian faith to make them align with culture or your own personal beliefs."<sup>4</sup> Defining deconstruction like this assumes a lot about the *motives* of the person deconstructing. The reality is that everyone's motives are mixed and messy. It's natural to find aspects of the Christian faith undesirable on the surface because they grind against our sinful natures and cultural norms. We're being transformed through the renewing of our minds, and that process inevitably includes some growing pains. This is true for all of us who are pursuing Christ with all our hearts, not just those who are deconstructing. To say that people who are deconstructing just want to pull apart undesirable aspects of the faith is to attack them for an impulse that, if we were honest with ourselves, most of us have felt at different times in our life and in different aspects of our faith.

Not only that, this definition ignores many things that would actually lead someone to deconstruct in the first place. It individualizes

deconstruction by isolating the person who is deconstructing from their broader communal and cultural context, which just isn't how faith works. No one's faith is purely individual. It's influenced by a whole host of factors that are both inside and outside the person. This definition assumes a maliciousness on the part of the person deconstructing that simply can't be assumed without further conversation.

If a person *is* deconstructing simply because they find the faith undesirable and want to conform it to their own personal beliefs, then we already have a word for that: apostasy. There isn't any struggle to keep the historic faith, only a desire to reshape it into their own image. But that isn't the full story when it comes to deconstruction. Those who are deconstructing are undergoing a far more complex and emotionally taxing process.

Here's the difference: by and large, when someone begins deconstructing, they aren't looking for a way to leave the faith; they are looking for a way to *stay* in the faith. Of course, like we just said, motives are messy. Who can know the depths of our hearts but God alone? But if someone simply wanted to leave the faith, they would. People do that all the time. They fade away over time or simply stop being Christians because they were never interested in being one in the first place. But deconstruction isn't that simple. There are other dynamics at play other than just wanting to leave Jesus behind.

Deconstruction isn't letting go of faith; it's holding on to the smallest string of faith someone can find for as long as they can. Just because some people choose to let go doesn't mean that letting go is inevitable. If we treat it as inevitable, it might turn out to be a self-fulfilling prophecy.

***“Good” deconstruction versus “bad” deconstruction.*** There is another narrative in Christian circles surrounding deconstruction that goes something like this: There are two kinds of deconstruction—healthy deconstruction and unhealthy deconstruction. Healthy deconstruction is good. Unhealthy deconstruction is bad.

Healthy deconstruction is when you examine your faith and untangle it from the cultural ideologies that aren't actually Christian in order to have a purer faith. Even Jesus deconstructed! Remember when he said, "You have heard it said . . . but I say"?<sup>5</sup> Martin Luther deconstructed! Remember when he nailed the Ninety-Five Theses to the Wittenberg door? When you deconstruct using the Bible and within your church community, it can be the best thing to ever happen to your faith. Deconstruction is healthy when you do it right.<sup>6</sup>

Unhealthy deconstruction is when you leave the Bible and the church behind and only seek to destroy your faith. It's not deconstruction; it's demolition. You're not trying to seek God; you're only trying to seek personal freedom—and probably freedom to sin. Instead of using Scripture to examine your culture, you're using culture to examine Scripture. It's a given that you won't have faith after you've deconstructed because you never really wanted to keep your faith in the first place.

On the surface, I understand why people say this. There were a couple of years when I repeated this narrative myself. It's getting at the fact that there is a questioning and wrestling with faith that is good. It's not abnormal or bad to doubt, have questions, or seek to untangle your faith from cultural lies that have seeped in from one place or another. Wanting to commend people for seeking truth is itself commendable, and I would rather people believe this narrative than think that all doubt and questioning is bad. Unfortunately, there are too many churches and relationships where asking questions at all is looked down on.

There is truth to this way of thinking about deconstruction, but it's missing something. People don't wake up one day with the conscious thought, "I want to be closer to the Lord. I guess I should deconstruct my faith! What's the healthiest way for me to do that?"

The person who is deconstructing did not choose to deconstruct. You, the person walking with them, cannot control their process of

deconstruction. Deconstruction is an experience that happens *to* you. You don't make a rational decision to deconstruct your faith. You realize you're deconstructing after it has already begun. This, as you might imagine, is a terrifying realization. The reason people who are deconstructing bristle at the idea of "good versus bad" deconstruction is that it feels as though people are trying to control them in a process that cannot be controlled.

You might be starting to understand why deconstruction can be such a difficult topic to discuss. It's difficult to know exactly what we're talking about when we talk about deconstruction. We need a working definition that captures the basic ideas of the process while being flexible enough to account for the various ways people experience deconstruction in their individual stories.

### **A WORKING DEFINITION OF DECONSTRUCTION**

Now that we've walked through ways of thinking about deconstruction that are more or less helpful, but ultimately incomplete, is there an alternative, more encompassing way of defining it? I think there is.

However we define *deconstruction*, it needs to meet two main criteria. It needs to (1) describe a wide array of experiences that—to a greater or lesser degree—would be affirmed as accurate by someone who is deconstructing or has deconstructed and (2) be useful for people who are walking with and ministering to those who are deconstructing, so that they can better understand the experience and walk with them through it in a way that respects them and the process.

If how we define deconstruction doesn't allow both groups to talk to each other with mutual understanding, then we've failed. If, however, our definition can act as an explanatory bridge between those who are deconstructing and those who desire to minister to them, it will serve as a helpful tool for fostering a better conversation, less reactivity, and, hopefully, stronger faith.

Let's get to our working definition of deconstruction, which we will spend the rest of part one of this book unpacking. Here is how I define deconstruction: "Deconstruction is a crisis of faith that leads to the questioning of core doctrines and untangling of cultural ideologies that settles in a faith that is different from before."

You can divide the definition into four parts:

1. A crisis of faith
2. Questioning of core doctrines
3. Untangling of cultural ideologies
4. Settling in a faith that is different from before

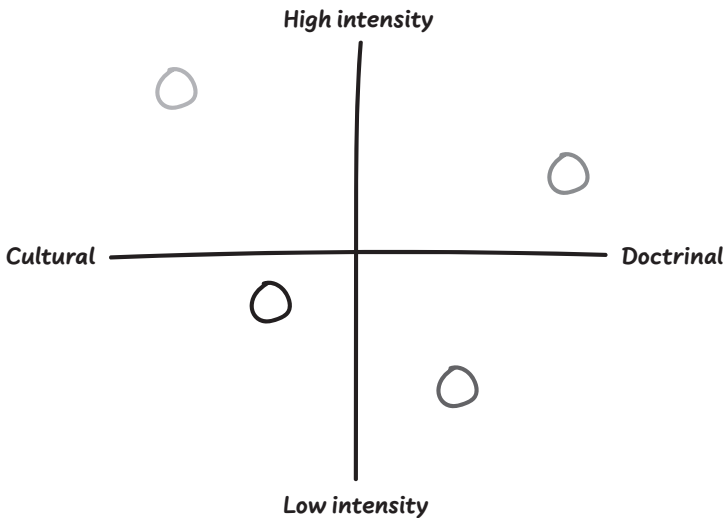
Each of the four parts of the definition is crucial to understanding what deconstruction is, but the most important part about this definition is that deconstruction is, before anything else, a *crisis of faith*. We can talk about doctrine, culture, and reconstruction all we want. Still, if we do not acknowledge that deconstruction is first and foremost a crisis of faith, then we have not understood deconstruction. Chapters two and three are dedicated to understanding the crisis.

## DIFFERENT KINDS OF DECONSTRUCTION

If you talk to more than one person about their deconstruction, you'll quickly realize that not everyone's deconstruction story is the same. That's why trying to define it is risky business. The moment you define it is the moment someone says, "That's not me!" So, a working definition of deconstruction is only as helpful as it is flexible.

Someone might experience more of a cultural deconstruction, while another might have more of a doctrinal deconstruction. A cultural deconstruction could lead to a doctrinal deconstruction and vice versa. Two different people might have the same questions and concerns but experience them at different levels of intensity. One might feel like their whole world is falling apart, and another might be bothered but not perceive it as much of a threat.

Think about this definition like a chart that you can plot points on. On the x-axis you have cultural on one side and doctrinal on the other. On the y-axis you have high intensity at the top and low intensity at the bottom. Someone's experience of deconstruction can be plotted at any point on the chart, and it can move over time. Just because someone starts out at one point doesn't mean they will stay there. A relatively low-intensity cultural deconstruction can result in a high-intensity doctrinal deconstruction and vice versa.



**Figure 1.1.** A working definition of deconstruction as plotted on an x-y chart

In the introduction, I mentioned treating this book like a puzzle with different pieces depending on the person who is deconstructing. This is one way to start thinking of deconstruction in dynamic terms rather than as a single, monolithic experience. Deconstruction is messy, complicated, and deeply personal. How we think about it must be flexible enough to understand a whole host of different experiences.

Now that we have a working definition of what deconstruction *is*, let's briefly look at what the experience of deconstruction is *like*.

## TESTING BY FIRE

There's a passage of Scripture that has become ground zero in my understanding of deconstruction. It captures many key components of the experience so well and succinctly that it serves as a helpful starting point. In 1 Corinthians 3:11-15, Paul gives us the clearest description of deconstruction in the Bible. He says,

For no one can lay any foundation other than what has been laid down. That foundation is Jesus Christ. If anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay, or straw, each one's work will become obvious. For the day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire; the fire will test the quality of each one's work. If anyone's work that he has built survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned up, he will experience loss, but he himself will be saved—but only as through fire.<sup>7</sup>

There are at least four takeaways from this passage that are relevant to our thinking about deconstruction:

1. Christianity falls apart without the foundation of Jesus Christ himself.
2. The quality of materials that make up a house of faith varies. “Gold, silver, [and] costly stones” are good materials that aren't easily affected by fires; in fact, they're *refined* by fire. “Wood, hay, or straw” are bad materials that are easily destroyed by fire.
3. There will be a day when the quality of everyone's materials that make up their house of faith will be tested through fire.
4. The experience of going through this fire will be felt as “experienc[ing] loss.” This means it won't simply be an intellectual exercise, but it will involve a grieving process.

These four points mean that the various beliefs we hold in our faith are not created equal. Some are stronger, some are weaker. And we will all, at one point or another, go through trials that will set our

beliefs on fire. The beliefs built on Christ will survive. The beliefs that aren't will burn up. We will experience the burning of our beliefs as a loss, which produces a crisis, and from the crisis, grief. Until the trial is over, we won't know which beliefs will survive and which beliefs will be burned up.

### WHAT LIGHTS THE FIRE?

If deconstruction is first and foremost a crisis of faith, then it's worth asking: What are the catalysts that can lead someone to experience that trapdoor opening under their faith and leaving them lost in the dark? I would like to briefly contend that there are three broad categories that act as the match that lights the fire in someone's house of faith. We explore each of these in more detail throughout the book.<sup>8</sup>

1. Cultural Christianity—a generation of Christians who opted for religious entertainment and moralistic therapeutic deism over devotion and discipleship, which leads to a weak foundation of faith
2. Compromised churches—a generation of churches that chose partisan politics and their reputations over spiritual formation and shepherding the flock, which leads to performative churches that have lost the plot of God's story and their purpose in it
3. Compounded anxiety—a generation of Christians who grew up experiencing hardships while having high unmet expectations for life, which led to difficulty persevering in suffering<sup>9</sup>

Each of these issues builds on the other. Because cultural Christianity has traded shepherds for celebrities and CEOs, the people who are supposed to care for our souls are too busy being famous or running leadership workshops to pastor their congregation. Because many of our churches have become nothing more than venues for religious entertainment instead of places to cast our cares on Jesus

together, we're left in the ocean of our own anxieties to sink or swim, and, understandably, many feel like they can no longer keep swimming. Something *has* to change.

That's the hope of this book. By closely examining the fires that test people's faith, we can foster a vision of discipleship to Jesus, the strength of our relationships, and the health of our churches to help people withstand the fiery trials of life—whether they be doubts, scandals, or sufferings—and develop a thriving faith in the process.

Yet, for many with thin and low-trust relationships, no theology of suffering, no robust doctrine, no vision for discipleship, and no healthy churches they can trust, their anxieties accumulate with no resources to relieve them. The center cannot hold, and the house collapses. Our weak house has given way, and now our faith is collapsing.

*Now, we're in a crisis of faith.*

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