

“Deliciously dark, blisteringly honest, and *funny* . . . Like the best art, this book will provoke, not placate; ruffle your feathers, not soothe them; work you up, not calm you down.”

John Mark Comer, *New York Times* best-selling author of
The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry and *Live No Lies*

“One thing we need *a lot* more of in our current moment is wise, thoughtful, and pastoral voices stepping into the main conversations we are all having. Josh is one of those voices and this book is one of those conversations. I can see myself buying ten of these and giving them to my entire circle of close friends. It’s *that* good.”

Jefferson Bethke, *New York Times* best-selling author of
To Hell with the Hustle

“This is not a reactive fundamentalist diatribe against deconstruction. On the contrary, this book deconstructs deconstructionism, offering a blood-and-guts defense of orthodoxy. Yet, at the same time, it is a heart-wrenchingly honest account from someone who deconstructed and returned to tell the tale. This lived experience ensures that this book is a compassionate guide for those wrestling with their faith—faith that has been warped by the American culture, dented by doubt, and hurt by hypocrisy.”

Mark Sayers, senior leader of Red Church in Melbourne, Australia,
and author of *Reappearing Church* and *A Non-Anxious Presence*

“Josh Porter is a deeply thoughtful, highly intelligent storyteller who’s mastered the art of writing from his bones more than his head. He writes as one who lived in the terrain he walks the reader through, navigating the treacherous journey from deconstruction to faithfulness like a trail guide who knows the land. In *Death to Deconstruction*, he weaves poetic prose, page-turning personal narrative, and deliberate insight into a prophetic call to faithfulness.”

Tyler Staton, author of *Searching for Enough* and
Praying Like Monks, Living Like Fools

“There is much being written on deconstruction these days, but the vast majority is coming from the outside looking in written by observers and spectators rather than those who have lived among the rubble of deconstruction. Josh writes as an insider, a wrestler with God, church, life, all of it—which makes his voice not just unique but credible. If you’re going on a journey through your own deconstruction, you need a credible guide. You will identify with his frustrations and be challenged by some narrow paths he recommends, but he will lead you to the real Jesus who is more radical, more rebellious, more tolerant, and more unwavering than popular podcast personalities dare to have you believe. If you want Jesus and not an off-ramp from faith, read this book.”

Rick McKinley, author of *Faith for This Moment* and *This Beautiful Mess*, and founding pastor of Imago Dei Community

“As leaders at Van City Church, we’ve had the privilege of witnessing Josh learn and grow with humility as he follows Jesus and helps lead others to do so. He has demonstrated his ability and character not only to teach our specific church but to speak about deconstruction and fidelity to Jesus to the broader church and those far from God. As our friend, we celebrate with him as he uses his gifts to honor King Jesus.”

The Overseers, Van City Church in Vancouver, WA

*Death to
Deconstruction*

**Foreword by
John Mark Comer**

Death to Deconstruction

**RECLAIMING FAITHFULNESS
AS AN ACT OF REBELLION**

Joshua S. Porter



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Death to Deconstruction: Reclaiming Faithfulness as an Act of Rebellion

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*For Beck.
When your time
comes, rebel well.*

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*“When I was young, I believed in three things:
Marxism, the redemptive power of cinema, and
dynamite. Now I just believe in dynamite.”*

SERGIO LEONE

*“When I was a child, I talked like a child, I
thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When
I became a man, I put the ways of childhood
behind me.”*

I CORINTHIANS 13:11

FOREWORD

THE CHRISTIAN MYSTIC THOMAS Merton once said that the best art “enables us to find ourselves and lose ourselves at the same time.”¹

It’s no surprise, then, that my friend Josh Porter started out as a fire-breathing, fake-blood-spewing lead singer of a punk rock band² . . . an *artist*.

Twenty years on, Josh is still an artist.

The book you’re about to read—part Mary Karr–esque memoir, deliciously dark, blisteringly honest, and *funny*; part erudite intellectual tour of the dominant theological and sociological roots underneath the growing social phenomenon of deconstruction—is, like the best art, designed to provoke something *in* you, to draw out a gut-level emotional reaction. Josh is like a good friend from his rural Georgian past, grabbing your wrist after a snakebite and sucking the poison out of your body before it hits your bloodstream and kills you.

You see, Josh has become something more than an artist; he’s become a pastor too, working on the canvas of the soul. His art has always been provocative, even polarizing at times. I assume Josh would say that’s on purpose. But it’s not for shock-jaw entertainment to draw a crowd, or a subtle play to garner more followers on the very platforms he is criticizing (proof: Josh is straight edge about social media too . . .). It’s to shock our *heart* before it dies of spiritual arrhythmia.

Josh’s word for this is “rebellion.” (See the subtitle.) At first, I bristled a bit at his word choice. Isn’t “rebellion” a snake-in-the-garden

thing? As he writes, “We think of uprisings and rebellions, and we think of protests, riots, Molotov cocktails. But often, the most subversive and effective rebellion is the simple defiant act of telling a different story.”

The book you are about to read is an act of rebellion, of telling a different, far better story than the dominant, millennial narratives of our age.

Both Josh and I came up playing in bands, and I imagine we carried some of our artistic sensibilities over into our preaching and writing. But while our paths have a common origin, they also diverge. While Josh was lighting cymbals on fire in seedy bars, I was trying to rip off this new band called Coldplay. Josh was fighting “the system”; I was trying to game it.

Decisions about mascara-wearing men aside, Josh and I became fast friends many years ago, when he moved to Portland. We worked together for a good run at Bridgetown Church, and his thoughtfulness and theological acumen gave a helpful sharpening to my own thinking. But it’s not his IQ, wit, or extraordinary writing talent that drew me to Josh; it’s his level of allegiance to Jesus as Lord, *and his rebellion against all the other lords of the world.*

The world around us—and often, sadly, even our fellow Christians—often pull us *down* to a lower level of allegiance, to let a little self-worship slide . . . wink-wink. Very few call us *up*, to a greater holiness.

Those who do are our true friends.

The best-seller lists abound with books by former Christians, and your local Christian bookstore is likely stocked with entire shelves of “Christian lite.” That’s okay; it’s nothing new.

But *this* is not *that*.

This book will provoke, not placate; ruffle your feathers, not soothe them; work you up, not calm you down. It will call you up, if you let it.

—JOHN MARK COMER

(Before We Begin)

IN THE SPRING OF 2018, I decided to kill myself. I opened a notebook and made a list. I split the list into two columns: pros and cons. I didn't want to be one of those hasty suicides. I needed to figure this out.

Mostly, though, my mind was made up.

I counted the items in each column: eight pro, seven con. Simple math.

There were, to my estimation, many pragmatic benefits to killing myself, but there were also some grave consequences that ranged from disastrous trauma for my loved ones to minor inconveniences like having to call someone to figure out my life insurance coverage. There were details to iron out. It was starting to sound like a lot of work. I wondered, "If I kill myself on a Wednesday, who will preach the sermon at church the following Sunday?"

I was, after all, the pastor.

I priced something called an "exit bag" online. My stomach was starting to hurt. I wrote in the "con" column: *I will bring shame to the name of Jesus*. This was important to me as a Christian. Do Christians kill themselves? I thought of something Brennan Manning wrote in his memoir, "Things haven't turned out the way I'd planned." Sitting in my church office price-checking helium kits with which to stop my heart and brain, I thought, "Things are not turning out the way I'd planned."

I frowned at the list. I was not doing well. I had come to believe a series of pretty nasty lies that would require a lot of hard work to undo. I sincerely believed with all my heart that my dying was probably the best option for everyone.

Probably.

Squatting like a gargoyle on the edge of the abyss, deceived, but with enough self-awareness to realize I was blowing it, I thought of something Thomas Merton said: “Despair is the absolute extreme of self-love. It is reached when a person deliberately turns his back on all help from anyone else in order to taste the rotten luxury of knowing himself to be lost.”¹

There was no clinical depression, no Lifetime movie tragedy. It started when I’d allowed years of unaddressed self-loathing and despair to snowball for a few lonely, dark months. Then I found myself weeping as I prayed through Psalm 69, desperate and miserable, and even with no one around to see it, I was pretty embarrassed by the whole thing.

What a joke, I remember thinking.

Killing myself, I knew, represented the utter undoing of everything I believed and the complete failure of everything to which I had dedicated my life, a catastrophe, a spiraling explosion of flaming wreckage. I didn’t believe that killing myself was permissible, but I thought of it the way Just War types rationalize killing Nazis. Sure, Jesus told us not to kill people, but sometimes you just have to do it.

It was hard to capture the magnitude of this awareness in a list of cons. One line item basically covered it: *I will bring shame to the name of Jesus.*

By this, I guess I meant that I had dedicated my life to learning and teaching the Bible and theology, to advocating for and practicing the way of Jesus, that I had built up the entirety of my life around Jesus and his teaching, and I was prepared to burn the entire thing to the ground, to reveal myself a selfish coward, a phony, a liar.

I imagined someone having to explain to my church, “Sorry, but the pastor turned out to be a huckster, week by week peddling a hope in Jesus he didn’t actually have. You’d all be fools to believe it yourselves.”

Like many, many people I’d known, it looked like I was giving up on Jesus.

I counted the items in each column again.



Part One

DECONSTRUCTING GOD

“There was nothing left to do but remain in the valley and suffer, or pack up and leave for more sunny climes and so live in guilt and shame forever.”

—NICK CAVE, *AND THE ASS SAW THE ANGEL*

Chapter 1

BLOOD AND FIRE

ON THE SATURDAY THAT my faith began to erode, my friend tells me, “I don’t want to blow fire anymore.”

We go on in minutes, and only now is he telling me this.

“Dude,” he says, “look at this.” He runs a couple of fingers between his lips, probes his gums, then presents me with a wet, gray pulp.

“What’s that?” I ask.

“My *gums*, dude. The rubbing alcohol is melting them or something.”

I lift the bottle from the dressing room counter and squint at the label. It doesn’t say anything about melting gums.

“Just don’t swallow it,” I tell him.

“I’m not, man. But still.”

When you’re eighteen years old, turning your local punk rock band into a fire-breathing spectacle isn’t rocket science. The routine is simple: (1) We duct tape an old T-shirt to the end of a drumstick. (2) We douse the stick’s shirt-end in rubbing alcohol so that when we apply fire, it becomes a crude torch. (3) Our friend Jesse (who isn’t actually *in* the band) takes a long drag from the rubbing alcohol—fills his cheeks with the stuff—and when we hit that first dramatic chord of our set (an E minor) Jesse spews the rubbing alcohol at the lit torch like seawater from a whale’s blowhole, igniting a

flaming red nebula that seemed, if we were honest, pretty dangerous and likely in violation of any number of fire and safety codes—even at scummy bars like this one. While Jesse spewed circus performer flames, our drummer used a similar approach to set his entire drum kit on fire. This is why we never briefed anyone on our amateur pyrotechnics. Better to ask for forgiveness than permission.

“Just do it one more time,” I reason, hitching up my leather shorts.

Jesse frowns at the bottle and sighs.

“Besides,” I say, “it’s not like *I* can do it. I’m spitting blood at the same time.” I produce the bottle of dyed corn syrup, and Jesse sighs again. Thing is, on most nights, while our drummer was setting his kit on fire and Jesse was blowing fire over the crowd, the rest of the band filled their mouths with a homemade batch of faux blood so everyone wound up looking like Sissy Spacek in the third act of *Carrie*.

“You guys do fire,” I say, pointing at Jesse and our drummer, “and the rest of us do blood.”

Mike, who plays guitar, grimaces. “That corn syrup tastes disgusting.”

“At least it doesn’t melt your gums,” Jesse points out.

Mike shrugs. “Touché, I guess.”

“You guys ready?” I shout at the band. “Let’s pray.”

SHOWTIME

Sticky with sweat and fake blood, I’m screaming into a dented microphone, rolling and gyrating on a filthy stage in a half-empty dive bar.

I’m singing songs I wrote about Jesus.

EIGHTEEN YEARS AFTER SHOWTIME

The problem, for me, was that I’d been raised by a Christian culture to be grafted into that Christian culture, and as far as I could tell, a lot of it was a sham. The Bible, I’d been told, was the nonnegotiable standard issue manual for the whole thing, but it didn’t read much like a manual at all. Not a good one, anyway. For starters, the same

stories showed up all over the place, but no one bothered making the details agree with each other. One guy writes, “X amount of people did this thing over here,” but then when another guy tells the story, he writes, “It was actually a totally different number in a totally different place.”

I figured one guy rounded up and the other rounded down, whatever. But that was only the beginning of it. If I was honest, some of the Bible’s factoids weren’t exactly what I’d call reliable. The Bible’s world, for example, was supported by planetary columns and surrounded by a dome of water. And for every weird water dome there were two more details that I could only describe as morally reprehensible. Babies smashed against rocks. Disobedient children stoned to death. Holy war.

I figured maybe I don’t get it. I’ll just do my best to follow the rules. There were a lot of them, and to hear these people in the Bible talk about it, they were pretty important. Problem was, I was terrible at that. Inwardly, I was often miserable over my own failure, wracked with grief, driven crazy by my ineptitude. I’d go looking for the merciful Jesus of my youth group, the one willing to let most anything slide just as long as you prayed a magical forgiveness incantation at summer camp.

“Jesus, I believe you died on the cross for my sins. I invite you into my heart as my personal Lord and Savior.”

(I couldn’t find a prayer like this one or instructions on how to offer it anywhere in the Bible, but I had it on the good authority of just about every Christian in my known world that avoiding hell more or less boiled down to reciting this magic formula.)

Then there were the Christians.

Just about every Christian I’d ever known in my first couple of decades alive was either wholly or in part pretty lousy at the whole Christian thing. Growing up in the rural Deep South, every fervent White churchgoer in my life was shamelessly racist and heatedly nationalistic. As a kid, my church’s summer Bible camp began with the Pledge of Allegiance to the American flag. The sermons I

remember were about the abomination of homosexuality, the corrupting poison of rock and roll music, the unspeakable horror of being left behind when God zapped every Christian into heaven during the rapture (any day now).

The Christianity I knew didn't remind me much of the stuff I read in the New Testament. When I asked about it, I was warned against questions in general, as they tended to cause the one asking to "go liberal." When I pointed at things like one set of numbers that contradicted another, the Christians urged me to "just have faith." If I asked about the Bible's near-constant emphasis on caring for the poor and the oppressed, I was told to tread carefully. "You're starting to sound like a socialist."

"Who are you to question God?" they'd ask.

The faith I could muster didn't seem to change much. I was getting sad. People were asking, "Well, are you in sin?" They'd ask, "Do you have enough faith?"

I wasn't sure. Maybe?

There was another big problem: me.

I don't like being told what to do. I don't like homogeneity; everyone made to look and talk and think and behave the same way. I don't like doing things according to modes of obligatory tradition. I don't like rules for rules' sake. What I really want to do is defy these things. Defy homogeneity, defy obligatory tradition, defy rules for rules' sake.

Tangled somewhere in the unforgiving thorns of my culturally Christian world was Jesus. My *idea* of Jesus, anyway. I liked my idea of Jesus, but I couldn't much see a way to free him from the awful mess of church, the Bible, and Christianity itself.

I figured maybe I'll have to make up my own Christianity.

TWELVE HOURS BEFORE SHOWTIME

We also prayed before rehearsal. Praying is what "Christian bands" do. With a few hours left before we had to load the van and head to

Savannah, I asked the room, “Who wants to pray before we start?” Someone always volunteered. They’d pray that when we got where we were going and when we performed and when we were offstage, we would represent Jesus well.

Our rehearsal space was the master bedroom of a dilapidated mobile home where a few of us lived. This was important to me. I’d dropped out of high school and abandoned the middle-class comforts of my parents’ home in service to the dream. The dream: living in a ramshackle trailer and playing music throughout the local dive bar scene of the swampy Deep South. Now, you had to speak up if you were the one praying to compete with the low drone of the half-dozen box fans crowding the stiff, filthy carpet. We’d carried all the furniture out of the bedroom months ago to make space for drums and amplifiers, and the room’s former residents were moved down the hall to mattresses on the floor. During the move, a couch had become wedged in the hallway a few feet above the ground. When our combined efforts were helpless to budge it, we left it hanging there until we moved.

The windows had all been covered in aluminum foil to reflect the merciless Georgia sun, but that didn’t help much. Scattered garbage and dirty laundry covered most surfaces. An authentic coffin we’d rescued from the dumpster behind a nearby funeral home was our living room coffee table. Everything stank. People worried about us.

Inside, we were praying.

This weird thing we were about to do, we believed, had everything to do with God. That’s how it all started, anyway. Lately, it seemed as if we were teetering, the scales of spirituality tipping, and I was sliding away from everything, poised to topple headlong into apostasy.

ELEVEN HOURS AFTER SHOWTIME

At church the next morning, I knew people were looking at me funny. I had flaking eyeliner caked in the corners of my eyes, and later that afternoon, I’d realize there were gobs of dried corn syrup stuck in the teased brambles of my hair.

A man I'd known all my life approached me, his face a cheerless mask, as if the sight of me was so deeply troubling that he could not affect the superficiality of Southern kindness.

"I want you to know, Josh," he told me, shaking my hand, "that I pray for you all the time."

He looked pained saying it, his eyes pleading, wanting to pull me back from the heresy written all over my face.

"Thanks," was all I said.

I was raised going to church. The same church every Sunday. Aside from a penchant for asking questions and an obvious disdain for traditionalism, at eighteen, I'd given no indication that I had any plans to abandon my Christianity. Unlike many of my more presentable peers (the ones who *didn't* show up to church speckled with mascara and fake blood), I'd demonstrated a completely uncoerced enthusiasm for allowing my faith to guide what I was sure would become my life's work: a fire-breathing punk rock band, with all of its rigorous demands. Like living in a dilapidated trailer with no air-conditioning.

But this, to the religious bubble of Southeast Georgia, was more worrying than a brush with atheism.

Shaking this man's hand in the church of my childhood, I thought of how I had seen the same disapproving glower on his face a week earlier when two Black teenagers passed the church on a Wednesday evening. He sighed then like he was sighing now as he broke conversation to monitor their passing, saying, "Hang on, I want to make sure these *brothers* aren't up to anything." This guy's own nefarious racism bothered him much less than the unbearable knowledge that I'd been wearing makeup in my band, a contrast that, in many ways, exemplified the Christian culture of my upbringing.

That Sunday, other young men smiled and shook hands with happy, approving elders. I knew these other teenagers. They preferred loose sex and weekend keggers to rock concerts, but they cleaned up real nice, and hey, they played football and tucked their shirts in and

showed decidedly less evidence of mascara or fake blood in their perfectly coifed hair.

One of them—the former president of the youth group before he graduated to leading men’s Bible studies—joined the old man’s scowl when he saw me.

“Still playing in that band, Josh?” he asked.

“Yeah.”

He cuffed me on the shoulder with a sigh. “We’re all praying for you.”

ONE WEEK AFTER SHOWTIME

Footage from that evening’s performance would later feature in a short film about my band’s conflict with the Southern Baptist church where we grew up but were eventually discouraged from attending. The little video had been a homework assignment for a local film school student who followed our band’s weird story. In the footage, we do—I must admit—make easy targets of ourselves.

There I am, shirtless, covered in fake blood, screaming, convulsing on stage. The footage overlays an interview with one of the pastors who was instrumental in my quasi excommunication from the church that reared me.

“Biblically,” the pastor says, “I don’t know if their style of music would hold up to God’s standards.”¹

All the distinctive features of a solid deconversion story were there: conservative fundamentalist upbringing, an abused and weaponized Bible, hypocrisy, rejected by religious authority. But there I am, covered in fake blood, surrounded by reckless plumes of fire, singing about Jesus. The Jesus I knew back then.

DECONVERSION BY SELFIE

On July 26, 2019, a once-famous Christian author and pastor posted a photo of himself on Instagram. So far, nothing unusual.

In it, he looks out into a beautiful wilderness. Here were all the curated staples of the comrade-approved social media post: lush scenery, a blue sky, a mountain, the person doing the posting awkwardly cramming themselves into the image, acting natural, leaving the beholder to wonder: Wait, so did he just ask someone, here, take a picture of me staring at this mountain while I pretend to look at it?

Again, all very normal.

The other, more sinister Instagram staple is also accounted for: the crumbling veneer of forced (and dishonest) positivity. The photo's caption admits that the author has lost his faith, is divorcing his wife (shattering the family that housed their children), and all of this as a big, bold, beautiful adventure!

Here I am in the picture, he seems to say, the story of me! Things may *look* like they're coming apart at the seams, but really, they are quite wonderful! Better than ever, actually! My ex-wife is better than ever! Our kids are better than ever! *I'm* better than ever! Get a load of this view! If it bothers you, it's only because you are—unlike the new, more enlightened me—still trapped in the backward obsolescence of religion.

Deconversion by selfie.

The rest of the feed follows suit: smiling selfies in front of murals, breathless selfies at marathons, pensive selfies before white brick walls. Each with flowery prose about the good life, a life without Jesus, the great, brave adventure of it all.

Deconversion brand management.

Describing his parting with Jesus, the former pastor wrote: “The popular phrase for this is ‘deconstruction,’ the biblical phrase is ‘falling away.’”²

I've been watching a similar turn of events for most of my life: Jesus as fad diet. Really important until it isn't. I have beheld legions of fevered converts brought up in Christian households and churned out by youth cultures and camps. Stirred to frenzy by what may have been genuine encounters with God, they ran, and they ambled

along the road of discipleship until they fell prey to the Great Predators that stalk the dark ravines lining the narrow way—shadowy brutes that prey on pain and confusion, making meals of once-eager Christians.

THE GREAT PREDATORS

The first Great Predator is *biblical illiteracy*. Although the Bible is an ancient library of writings drafted by dozens of authors across multiple continents in several languages, over several centuries, the most complex literary volume in history is usually perused like some simple, superficial thing and dismissed by angry readers who don't understand the passages that so offend them. Who can blame them? They've never been taught how to read it.

The second Great Predator is *the problem of evil*. If God is so good, and powerful enough to do anything, why is there so much evil, injustice, and suffering in the world? Of all the Great Predators, this one is the most cunning. It lures its prey from the narrow road by traumatizing them, and in their pain, they become convinced that they can go no further.

The third Great Predator is a *politicized Christianity*. When oppressive, power-hungry bullies seem part and parcel of Christian experience, who can blame the great many who want nothing to do with the ugly mob of mean-spirited, hyperpolitical Bible-thumpers?

The fourth Great Predator is *hypocrisy*. It's not just the seedy pockets of church history (crusades and colonists, Jim Crow, the prosperity gospel). It often seems as if those most ardent about Christian morality are the least likely to uphold it. If it's not the sex scandals and embezzlement of televangelists, it's the indulgent Instagram lifestyles of influential pastors, or the casual racism of a churchgoing family member, or the generally unkind face of evangelicalism.

The final lumbering Predator is *self-denial*. Even if you get past the politicians and hypocrites, even if you survive your great tragedy with your faith intact, you will find that it all comes down to Jesus, whose invitation to apprenticeship was “deny yourself.” Modern Western individualists cannot abide so outrageous a demand. In our Diet

Coke world of #dowhatmakesyouhappy, the audacity of Jesus’s call to self-denial isn’t just bold, it’s backward, bigoted, and dangerous.

Biblical illiteracy, the problem of evil, politicized Christianity, hypocrisy, and self-denial. The Great Predators. I fell to each of them.

Eventually, I decided to stagger upright and hobble forward.

THE THREE READERS

This book has three readers. If you have some experience with Jesus, with Christianity, you’re one of them. You’re probably saying to yourself, maybe I’m not, but you are.

The First Reader is the Quivering Disciple. You follow Jesus. You love him. Either you grew up around the things of Jesus, or you discovered them somewhere along the snaking, chaotic road of life, but here you are. No disciple of Jesus—not Mary Magdalene nor the apostle Paul, not Harriet Tubman nor C. S. Lewis—managed to execute their apprenticeship to Jesus standing bolt upright, back rigid, a cool beacon of uninterrupted, stoic confidence. Mostly, we’re pretty bad at it, give or take. Simon Peter denied Jesus. Paul called himself the first and foremost sinner. Both of them followed Jesus. They were, like you, First Reader, Quivering Disciples who sometimes walked the narrow road of discipleship with joy and steely resolve, and probably just as often dragged themselves deeper still, limping, bedraggled, trembling beneath the weight of it all, but dragging themselves deeper still.

The Second Reader is the Deconstructed. The term “deconstruction” has all sorts of unique contexts and meanings, but the basic definition of the verb sums it up:

de-con-struct | ,dēkən’strækt | verb [*with object*] **1** : analyze (a text or a linguistic or conceptual system) by deconstruction, typically in order to expose its hidden internal assumptions and contradictions and subvert its apparent significance or unity **2** : reduce (something) to its constituent parts in order to reinterpret it

At the time of writing, the term “deconstruction” has become an umbrella term to describe a process in which someone who was once a Christian embarks on a quest to jettison their Christianity. Bailing out on God isn’t exactly a bold new concept; it’s been going on since the origins of Christianity and earlier, but the modern junk drawer term “deconstruction” probably has some roots in something called critical theory, a philosophical tradition that “refuses to identify freedom with any institutional arrangement or fixed system of thought.”³

Deconstruction is an ambiguous wraith that moves through all manner of progressive ideologies, consuming and reshaping them like No-Face in Hayao Miyazaki’s *Spirited Away*. The spirit of deconstruction is often born from healthy and reasonable questions and doubt but piloted by frustration and hurt. It roves the endless chambers of existential angst, gobbling up anything to relieve the pain and to hurt the people who hurt it.

Because deconstruction rises from the shapeless tar of critical theory, it is often suspicious of any and all forms of structure and authority as inherently oppressive. Thus, deconstruction wants no master beyond itself, creating a colossal arrangement of near-impenetrable hyperindividualism. This is a very American thing to do. As theologian Greg Boyd once put it, “If the fall is about humans wanting to be independent lords of our own lives, then America is the fall on steroids!”⁴

Sometimes the deconstruction creature retains incomplete scraps and fragments of Christianity (usually, the parts that suit the deconstructing party’s evolving ideology, until they don’t), but without authority, this patchwork worldview becomes a muddled snarl of all-you-can-eat belief—a loaded, nauseating tray of fried spirituality. Each morsel looked delicious at the buffet, but it doesn’t exactly make for a sensible meal.

Deconstruction is the shadow of transformation. As they grow and mature, every disciple of Jesus will transform their theology, their faith, their belief, in several significant ways and in many small ones. We learn we were wrong about certain things. Stuff we thought was

really important becomes decidedly less so. Some things we undervalued become key. We learn to understand things in different ways. But all of this is an evolution of the same faith. We may renovate the house of our discipleship, move things around, paint a few walls, get rid of some old furniture, but it remains the same recognizable house.

Every disciple of Jesus transforms. Transformation unfolds within the safeguards of *orthodoxy*—the accumulated wisdom and accountability of many centuries of the Jesus movement that discerns what teaching and practice align with Jesus and what departs from him. Orthodoxy has room for transformation, but deconstruction scraps orthodoxy, stripping it for spare parts.

Deconstruction is an aggressive, cancerous outgrowth of the ordinary transforming we all do, but it takes a sledgehammer to the walls in a desperate, scrambling effort to reveal some sinister rot within. Deconstruction is a takedown, not an evolution. It's not a little squirming tadpole that sprouts legs and drags itself up a primordial beach—one thing becoming a new thing, but still the same thing—it brings an angry boot down on the slippery-limbed fish before its gills take their first gulp of oxygen. Sometimes it happens fast, beginning in a moment and accomplished with quiet efficiency. Other times it takes months or years, but eventually, renovating the house proves too tiring, and the decision is made to tear the entire structure from its foundation so that the old house is deconstructed and no more.

“The popular phrase for this is ‘deconstruction,’ the biblical phrase is ‘falling away.’”

You, Second Reader, the Deconstructed, you're wary of all this. You're wise to the con. But let me admit something: I'm not trying to change your mind. Why would I? We probably have the same story, more or less.

The Third Reader is the One at the Impasse. You follow Jesus, and you have arrived at the end of the first road. The time has come to either transform or deconstruct.

You don't know if you need a paintbrush or a sledgehammer.

ABANDON ALL HOPE YE WHO ENTER HERE

The thing we often call “Christianity” can be a trying way of life. This is by design. Jesus, founder of the movement, warned his would-be followers that what he had in mind would be difficult, that we'd lose much, that much would be asked of us, that friends and family might fall away in the process, that there would be people who would hate us and want to do us harm for no other reason than being in league with Jesus. There are very understandable reasons that when many are confronted with Jesus's jarring invitation to “deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me,” they decline (see Luke 9:23). I was given every conceivable reason to abandon the Christian ship. I'll tell you about them. There are very understandable reasons that many who responded to the strange call of Jesus in one season of life scorn it in another. But there are other, arguably *less* valid reasons for falling away.

Everyone knows someone who is formerly Christian. It could be someone you've read about, someone you love; it could be you. In my personal experience with the Great Predators and through deconstruction, I've found that logic and candid, straightforward sincerity are not hallmarks of the deconstruction dialogue, nor its frenzied religious pushback. Christians are scared and disappointed to see their brothers and sisters deconstruct their faith. Pastors and parents are troubled by common doubts and misgivings about the Bible and the church. Jaded former Christians are often embittered by the violent process of deconversion, becoming aggressive and combative in their new worldview. A wall is erected between the past and the present. Any conversation devolves into defense mode for fear of toppling a flimsy ideology under the weight of its own hypocrisy.

But I get deconstruction. I understand deconversion.

I've already given away that I somehow moved from deconstruction, through disenchantment, back to following Jesus. It's in the not-so-subtle title of the book and everything. But I did not return to faith because I was afraid of what other people would think if I didn't. I am wired for rebellion. To a fault, I am compelled to defy

what is asked and expected of me. I do not persist in faith because I am afraid of being punished if I don't. I dispensed with all my weird ideas of God as a menacing vendor of cosmic hellfire a long time ago. I do not insist on the Christian tradition because I need a job. Though I chose to become a pastor, the task isn't exactly a picnic, and there are lots of other things I could be doing. I certainly did not embrace the way of Jesus by plugging my ears and closing my eyes to very real, very valid problems with God, the Bible, and the church. I obsessed over them for years. I read and I studied. I searched.

I was a Christian. I embarked on a path toward deconstruction. I am still a Christian.

These things will become increasingly clear as we go, but for clarity's sake, I'll put my cards on the table: I believe in the triune God of the Bible. I believe in the God whom Jesus called "Father." I believe that Jesus of Nazareth is, as he put it, "the way, and the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). I believe that no one comes to the Father except through Jesus. I believe that the Spirit of Jesus continues to equip, direct, transform, and convict disciples of Jesus today. I believe that the Bible is inspired by God, and as such, it is trustworthy and authoritative in everything it intends to say and to teach. Understanding what the Bible intends to say and teach is complicated and divisive, so the Bible is often misunderstood and abused. I believe that the only venue for carrying out discipleship to Jesus and for learning and obeying the Scriptures is the imperfect but beautiful gathering together of Christians that we call the church.

Having navigated both enthusiastic churchgoing evangelicalism and disillusioned alienation from it, I'm not interested in pandering to a fragile Christianity that doesn't make room for our serious quibbles, critiques, and crises. I find it equally unhelpful to placate the happily deconverted by behaving as if their post-Christian spirituality is without its own set of contradictions. If spirituality and our questions about it matter at all, we should probably use the same shrewd measuring stick to appraise being Christian *and* not being Christian.

Whatever you are, reading this thing will be anything but a comfortable or accommodating experience. This book won't pat you on the head, and it won't work very hard to avoid offending you or calling your most beloved preconceptions into question. I'm well beyond concern for any of those things. If you are not willing to be provoked, to have your most cherished ideological infrastructure called into question, whether it is Christian or post-Christian, then abandon all hope ye who enter here.