

**REDISCOVERING THE LOVE,  
BEAUTY, AND FREEDOM  
OF JESUS IN AN AGE  
OF DISILLUSIONMENT**



**THE  
LIGHT  
IN OUR  
EYES**

**NICHOLAS MCDONALD**

# THE LIGHT IN OUR EYES

Rediscovering the Love, Beauty, and Freedom  
of Jesus in an Age of Disillusionment

**Nicholas McDonald**

Foreword by Karen Swallow Prior



MULTNOMAH

This is a work of nonfiction. Some names and identifying details have been changed.

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®, Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. ([www.zondervan.com](http://www.zondervan.com)). The “NIV” and “New International Version” are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica Inc.™ Scripture quotations marked (ESV) are taken from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. Scripture quotations marked (NASB) are taken from the (NASB®) New American Standard Bible®, copyright © 1960, 1971, 1977, 1995, 2020 by the Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. All rights reserved. ([www.lockman.org](http://www.lockman.org)).

Italics in Scripture quotations reflect the author’s added emphasis.

A Multnomah Trade Paperback Original

Copyright © 2025 by Nicholas McDonald

Foreword by Karen Swallow Prior copyright © 2025 by  
Penguin Random House LLC.

Penguin Random House values and supports copyright. Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes free speech, and creates a vibrant culture. Thank you for buying an authorized edition of this book and for complying with copyright laws by not reproducing, scanning, or distributing any part of it in any form without permission. You are supporting writers and allowing Penguin Random House to continue to publish books for every reader. Please note that no part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner for the purpose of training artificial intelligence technologies or systems.

All rights reserved. Published in the United States by Multnomah, an imprint of the Penguin Random House Christian Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, 1745 Broadway, New York, NY 10019.

MULTNOMAH and the Multnomah M colophon are registered trademarks of Penguin Random House LLC.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: McDonald, Nicholas (Pastor), author.

Title: The light in our eyes: rediscovering the love, beauty, and freedom of Jesus in an age of disillusionment / Nicholas McDonald.

Description: [Colorado Springs, CO] : Multnomah, [2025] | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2024043185 | ISBN 9780593601525 (trade paperback) | ISBN 9780593601532 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Christian life—Presbyterian authors.

Classification: LCC BV4501.3 .M3325 2025 | DDC 248.4—dc23/eng/20241211  
LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2024043185>

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

[waterbrookmultnomah.com](http://waterbrookmultnomah.com)

[penguinrandomhouse.com](http://penguinrandomhouse.com)

ScoutAutomatedPrintCode

Book design by Caroline Cunningham

Sunburst: AdobeStock/mayrum; emoticons: AdobeStock/Pure Imagination; arrow: AdobeStock/Saepol; triangle: AdobeStock/line’s vector; crown: AdobeStock/4zevar

For details on special quantity discounts for bulk purchases, contact [specialmarketscms@penguinrandomhouse.com](mailto:specialmarketscms@penguinrandomhouse.com).

The authorized representative in the EU for product safety and compliance is Penguin Random House Ireland, Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68, Ireland, <https://eu-contact.penguin.ie>.

# Foreword

There can be no doubt that the American church—particularly the evangelical church—is facing a mounting crisis. As documented in the pages of this book, the number of evangelicals who can now be described as dechurched, deconstructed, or having departed from their truth is rising dramatically.

One writer depicted such a moment in the church:

Ordinary Christians came to have greater expectations of what the church ought to be doing. When expectations weren't met, people began to criticize the church in all kinds of ways. One of the things you see developing is a real cynicism on the part of ordinary Christians about the church and the clergy.<sup>1</sup>

Notably, these words weren't written to describe our current church situation. Rather, they were penned decades ago by theologian and historian Alister McGrath. McGrath was

writing about a period in the church that took place hundreds of years ago, during the time leading up to the Protestant Reformation. Yet McGrath's words sound eerily familiar, don't they? Here is more from the article: "The late Middle Ages saw the church going through a period of real doctrinal confusion. People were not sure what they believed. They weren't sure why they believed it, either."<sup>2</sup>

It was truly a time of crisis for the church. Yet that crisis, mercifully, led to much needed change through both the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation that followed. As McGrath put it,

By looking at the way God restored, renewed and reformed his church back then, we can gain some ideas about what he might want to do to his church here, today, in this place. It is about looking through history to discover what God has been doing in the past, then we can say, "Maybe he wants to do that kind of thing here today."<sup>3</sup>

What American evangelicalism is going through now can, just as it has in the past, lead to renewal, refinement, and even reformation. I believe this deeply—not just despite but even because of the disillusionment within and toward the church we see today.

Let's consider the current movement of protest within the church called "Deconstruction."

When the word *deconstruction* gained currency among Christians a few years ago—particularly among younger and evangelical believers—many in the church were alarmed. To be sure, a certain amount of alarm was (and is) warranted. The fact is that some of the first and the loudest of those who were "deconstructing their faith" walked away from the church and Christianity altogether. It seemed that deconstruction (whatever that is, since the definition of the word

itself has been contested and continues to be used in a variety of ways) would always lead inevitably to unbelief.

But that seeming inevitability has been shown not to be the case. In fact, I see more cause for hope than alarm through this trend toward deconstruction. If you don't agree with me, wait until you finish reading *The Light in Our Eyes*. I think you will see what I mean. I think you will find much reason to hope in the midst of this transitional period in the church—whether you are someone watching others deconstruct or you are someone undergoing that process yourself.

It might be helpful to think through the word *deconstruction* for the metaphor it is.

It does not mean “destroy” or “destruct” (although, sadly, that might sometimes be the ultimate outcome). Rather, *deconstruction* suggests taking apart something that has been constructed. Something that has been built up over time, added to, covered, exposed, walled up, papered over, dusted, decorated, and perhaps decayed. Like buildings, our very lives are constructed over time through events, relationships, and experiences that accumulate, layer upon layer. So, too, our faith—which begins with the simple belief in Jesus as Savior and Lord—can accumulate complicated apparatuses built up over time.

Just as buildings sometimes require examination to see what parts are solid and necessary and what are merely extraneous or even rotten or dangerous, so too, the components of our faith require such examination. Deconstruction isn't just asking questions. And it's not just a look at the surface level of things. It's taking something apart and examining it from the foundation up.

This means, of course, it's a process laden with risk. That's what makes it necessary to come alongside those involved in this hard, painful, and often scary work of examining the

once-unexamined assumptions of evangelical culture. (Or to come alongside others if we are the ones doing this work.)

What other choice do we have? As Nicholas shows in the pages that follow, people are disillusioned, doubting, leaving the church, and departing from Christianity—not just deconstructing. But coming alongside those who are disillusioned, doubting, or departing isn't something we should do just as a reactionary measure because we fear change or don't want decline in influence or power. Rather, we do this holy work because it is part of being faithful in the times to which God has called us.

After all, as Nicholas shows so compellingly and beautifully in this book, Jesus came to restore each of us to a right relationship with our Creator, with creation, and with one another. Too many in the modern church and the surrounding culture don't know this. Or, perhaps, in the storm and stress of life, we have forgotten it. We don't see it. So we don't even desire it. To help others see such good, we must see it too. To help others desire it, we must desire it ourselves.

Jesus wants all the rotten boards to be removed, the crooked beams to be made straight, the floors to be made level, and the windows to be cleaned to let the light shine in. The church is His house, and He has made His house to be a place of peace, love, beauty, and freedom. These are the things that put the light in our eyes. And in the world.

When I read the words of a younger believer like Nicholas McDonald—the words of someone who has doubted, questioned, asked, listened, seen, heard, and proven to be faithful—I see more light ahead in the church and the world. I think in reading these pages, you will too.

—KAREN SWALLOW PRIOR

# Contents

Foreword by Karen Swallow Prior	vii
1 Disillusionment, Deconstruction, and the Great Dechurching	3
<b>PART 1 Deconstruction</b>	
2 Deconstructing	21
3 Exclusion	35
4 Relevance	50
5 Vacuum	60
<b>PART 2 Restoration</b>	
6 Escape	77
7 Re-storied	96

8 Zechariah 111

9 Shalom 121

### **PART 3 Jesus's Dreams**

10 Love 141

11 Freedom 166

12 Beauty 194

Benediction 225

Acknowledgments 231

Notes 235

# 1

## Disillusionment, Deconstruction, and the Great Dechurching

To make our way forward is to go back in history. To recover past trauma is to awaken to the pain, and we cannot heal until we see the narratives of the past renewed by faith and hope. We cannot move forward by ignoring the past.

—MAKOTO FUJIMURA, *Silence and Beauty*

Can faith be bought  
in supermarkets  
Like canned soup  
lined up in a row?  
If it is defective  
may I return it?  
As it is two sizes  
too small.

—E R SKULMOSKI, “Both the Wicked and the  
Righteous Have a Midlife Crisis”

**Y**ou probably know this by now, and if you don't, it's time: The American evangelical church is facing the largest mass exodus ever recorded. It would not be an exaggeration to say that tens of millions of people have left the church over the past decade. You might be one of them.

In their book *The Great Dechurching*, Jim Davis and Michael Graham observe,

More people have left the church in the last twenty-five years than all the new people who became Christians from the First Great Awakening, Second Great Awakening, and Billy Graham crusades *combined*. Adding to the alarm is the fact that this phenomenon has rapidly increased since the mid-1990s.<sup>1</sup>

Those who've dechurched often call their experience "deconstruction." The term has grown in popularity thanks to trending #exvangelical social media influencers like Joshua Harris, Abraham Piper, and Rhett and Link. But *deconstruction* is often a slippery term to define. Is everyone who has dechurched also deconstructed? Is everyone who is deconstructing also dechurching? Is there such a thing as "good deconstruction"? Hip-hop artist Lecrae has suggested that, yes, deconstruction *can* be a good thing:

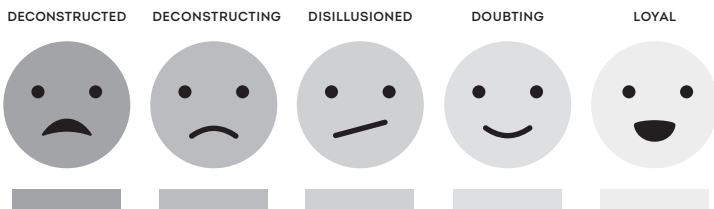
Many don't realize there have been healthy Deconstructions throughout history. . . . There are generations of believers who have been thru this and we can learn from them versus destroying our life and faith trying to figure it out alone. . . . Many movements from the reformation to the civil rights movement involved deconstruction using scripture and then reconstruction. I offer this as an encouragement to those struggling. My faith is stronger than ever. I've been there and healing is possible.<sup>2</sup>

Others like Alisa Childers and Tim Barnett have taken issue with this, saying, "Faith deconstruction is a postmodern process of rethinking your faith without regarding Scripture

as a standard,” so faithful Christians should not use this term to describe healthy spiritual growth.<sup>3</sup> But is the characterization of deconstruction as a full-throated rejection of Scripture fair or accurate? That may be true of the loudest online voices of the deconstruction movement. But Davis and Graham observe that, on the whole, the dechurched tend not to be critical of orthodoxy:

Dechurched evangelicals are still largely orthodox in their faith. When it comes to our primary doctrines, 68 percent of those we surveyed still believe in the Trinity, 64 percent believe in the divinity of Jesus, 65 percent believe Jesus’ death on the cross paid the penalty for the sins of those who believe in him, 67 percent believe in the resurrection, 62 percent believe that Jesus is the only way to God, and 61 percent believe the Bible is a reliable document for all matters of faith and practice.<sup>4</sup>

This would strongly suggest that the term *deconstruction* is not a one-size-fits-all description. In my experience, folks mean at least four separate—but related—things when they use the term *deconstructing* to describe themselves. That’s why a better approach would be to see deconstruction as a spectrum of postures.



## 1. THE LOYAL

The Loyal would not use *deconstructing* to describe themselves, because they tend not to question the cultural assumptions of American Evangelicalism (more on that term in a moment). They feel happy and at home in the evangelical church and assume the deconstruction movement is coming from progressive influences on the next generation. There are plenty of faithful evangelical Loyals whom I know and love. Those in this category likely find it very difficult to be helpful to their children, nieces and nephews, or grandchildren unless they have some clear grasp of why their loved ones are deconstructing in the first place. My hope is that this book provides the Loyal some context for a conversation and hopefully makes the whole thing sound less frightening. If you are in the Loyal camp, many things in this book may make you feel guarded. That's understandable. But I encourage you to read through the whole text before coming to a conclusion, because in order to reach your deconstructing friends and loved ones, you're going to need to sit in these uncomfortable spaces with patience and respect. Jumping to hasty conclusions or using quick labels is the surest way to alienate them. For example, in this book I will speak candidly about how American Evangelicals have tied Christian faithfulness to certain political ideologies. But the truth is, I'm embarrassingly elastic and I'd like to think somewhat eclectic in my political opinions.

I know and admire faithful Christians who voted for Trump, those who voted against him, and those who chose not to vote or voted third party. So if you perceive this book as having some kind of political agenda—to either condemn one side or endorse another—please understand that this is not my intention. My goal is to encourage us to think beyond

the narrow confines of “cable politics.” If we fail to do this, we risk losing the next generation.

## 2. THE DOUBTING

Still somewhat loyal to American Evangelicalism, the Doubting may have some serious questions about the Bible and Christianity. They may occasionally use the term *deconstructing*, but not often. That’s because they might be tugging at the threads of American Evangelicalism, but they’re still receptive to the Loyal’s answers to their questions. They feel culturally at home in the movement. They don’t feel so much discomfort in the church that they’re ready to take a hike, but depending on how their questions are treated, this is a fork in the road. Some of them will pull back into the Loyal crowd. Others will continue to unthread American Evangelicalism and end up in the third category—the Disillusioned. For my readers who count themselves among the Doubting (and this may sound surprising), I don’t want this book to bring you back into the Loyal crowd. If I do my job well, I’m hoping to bring you through a growth process beyond these categories.

## 3. THE DISILLUSIONED

The Disillusioned are—according to my own experience and Davis and Graham’s research—a huge swath of the de-churched and those who use the term *deconstructing*. The Disillusioned still hold to orthodox Christian beliefs but feel disenfranchised not by evangelical convictions but by American evangelical subculture. They aren’t questioning orthodoxy. They aren’t even questioning the classic “Bebbington quadrilateral”<sup>5</sup> of evangelical beliefs: (1) the authority of Scripture, (2) the atonement of Jesus, (3) the need for rebirth

by the Holy Spirit, and (4) a commitment to social and spiritual activism. These doctrinal commitments aren't the issue for these folks. Rather, they're questioning something Australian evangelical historian John Dickson calls the "Bully Church" syndrome particular to American evangelicals. Dickson notes that many evangelicals around the globe have stopped using the term *evangelical*, thanks to us:

Evangelicals in Britain and Europe and Australia are very different from evangelicals here [in America]. And I've noticed, in the last ten years, lots of Australians who used to be happy going by *evangelical*, because they meant British evangelical—that gentle Anglicanism of William Wilberforce, socially engaged, happy to be in public, keen to see people evangelized with the Bible—they don't want to go by *evangelical* anymore.<sup>6</sup>

In other words, global evangelicals agree. American evangelicals need a vibe check. Our ethos is cynical. We're insecure about the future. Afraid. Apocalyptic in our outlook. Angry. Evangelical religion scholar John Stackhouse notes that "in America . . . evangelicals can think that they either run the country or they should. Nowhere else do evangelicals think that."<sup>7</sup> In other words, the difference between American evangelicals and global evangelicals is this: We're the *entitled*. That toxic American Evangelicalism is what so many millions of dechurched Americans are deconstructing. They will often use the word *deconstructing*—though I give it a more technical definition below—but what they're describing is disillusionment. They may have read Kristin Kobes Du Mez's *Jesus and John Wayne* or Jemar Tisby's *The Color of Compromise* or Tim Alberta's *The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory*. They may have read Russell Moore's *Losing Our Religion* or Beth Moore's X (formerly Twitter) account and memoir *All*

*My Knotted Up Life* or listened to Mike Cospers's *The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill* podcast and felt a sense of haunting familiarity. It's not that the Disillusioned are ready to jump ship on faith, but they sense—rightly—that something is rotten in American evangelical Denmark, and they're not sure where else to turn.

If you find yourself among the Disillusioned with American Evangelicalism, I wrote this book for you. We don't need another book merely telling us to burn down the American evangelical project. We need a way forward toward renewal and restoration. That's what I hope to point you toward.

#### 4. THE DECONSTRUCTING

The Deconstructing have experienced both doubts and disillusionment because of Bully Evangelicalism but taken it a bit further. The Deconstructing—where I once was—may consider themselves post-Bible or post-church Christians, looking for spirituality without all the American evangelical baggage. Often, these folks have a sense not only that American Evangelicalism isn't for them but also that it's deeply wrong and dangerous, perhaps because they themselves have experienced or witnessed the kinds of abuse—spiritual, emotional, physical—that Bully Evangelicalism culture makes so much space for. Folks in this crowd could properly be called “Deconstructing” in the sense that Yale literature professor Paul de Man (the great popularizer of the word) used it: the dismantling of previously accepted ideas because of the belief that they have no inherent meaning. Now, if you'd asked me what I was doing when I left the Bible and the church behind twenty years ago, I definitely would *not* have whipped out Paul de Man and claimed that Christianity had no inherent meaning. What I would have said, as a “post-Bible,” “post-church” Christian, is that I had a high value for Jesus's words.

However, I had very little patience for the rest of the Bible. I had hardly any interest in what the global, historic church said about the Bible. If you brought up something in Scripture that crossed my sensibilities, I would have told you there are lots of different interpretations of the Bible, and I chose not to accept yours. I probably, however, never would have said “the Bible is wrong.” Had I been deconstructing today, I may have described myself as redecorating a room or reassembling a boat or a house or something.

But years later, with help from wise friends, mentors, and the historic church, I can see in my past Deconstructing self twenty years ago an assumption deeply ingrained in me, and nearly every deconstructor I know: I assumed *I* was the architect of Christian faith. Me. *I* decided which interpretations to choose from. *I* decided which verses to emphasize. In essence, I became the architect of Christianity. Deeply buried in this is the assumption that Christianity had no inherent meaning, but I would never have said it that way. This is why, throughout this book, I’m not going to talk about “reconstructing” faith. More on that later.

For now, I’ll say this: The curious thing about the explosion of the term *deconstruction* in American Exvangelical culture today is that scholars have almost entirely stopped using the word. Why? Because in the academic world, this word fairly fell out of favor when—surprise!—it was discovered that Paul de Man’s deconstruction philosophy was really a way to justify his insipid lifestyle. De Man, after his death, was exposed as “a bigamist, a convicted criminal, and a Nazi sympathizer.”<sup>8</sup> The idea that all of life and language was meaningless, as it turned out, was a convenient way to excuse his choices. It makes sense, doesn’t it? When someone—anyone—makes themselves and their own preferences, values, and desires the arbiter of truth, something is going to go awry, no matter what religion or ideology they claim.

So is there something to the critique, often made of proper deconstructers, that behind their objections there lurks a simple unwillingness to follow Jesus into the hard things? To make Christian faith all about them? Maybe. Sometimes. Often. But here's the problem with lobbing grenades at this crowd: If you had said to me twenty years ago, "You're just Deconstructing because you love sin more than Jesus," I would have said, "You're just *Loyal* because you love sin more than Jesus!" The reason I was deconstructing in the first place was because, thanks to the culture of Bully Evangelicalism, the Christians around me interpreted the Bible in a way that let *them* continue in their biases, power-seeking habits, greed, and hatred.

But here's the key: *I was still searching.*

I was deconstructing, but I wasn't *departed*. I needed someone who both affirmed my critiques of Bully Evangelicalism and offered me an ancient, stirring vision of Jesus's love, beauty, and freedom that spoke to my deepest dreams. That's no simple task. This is why the process of healing for the Deconstructing is going to be much longer than it is for the Doubting or even the Disillusioned. For me, healing came slowly, in safe and thoughtful communities. My friend Ian Harber, author of the book *Walking Through Deconstruction*, once asked how long it took me to find healing after deconstructing my faith.

"About twelve years," I said. There was a long silence on the phone.

"That tracks," he said finally.

"How about for you?" I asked.

"About ten years." This range, for the Deconstructing, is generally true. I think the fastest process I've seen a true deconstructor go through, to feel renewed in their faith, is seven years. But that's because my friend Joseph—you'll read about his story in a later chapter—is such an intense personality and truth seeker that, honestly, walking through deconstruction

and renewal for him was like doing it on steroids. I'd also like to think it was, in part, because he and I met regularly throughout the process, and after having fumbled my way through working with deconstructers for about a decade, I finally had a somewhat clear idea of what Joseph needed.

Sadly, rather than restoring the Deconstructing in a spirit of gentleness, our evangelical response tends to push them further away, catapulting the Doubting and Deconstructing into the Departed phase. So, yes, some evangelical critiques of deconstruction ring partially true: The fully Deconstructed might very well love sin more than Jesus. But at the end of the day, without loving and patient intervention, *we all do*, don't we? We should rightly condemn modern heretics, of course. But who is doing the work we're called to do in response to the wavering: "If anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:1–2, ESV)? Or, more simply, which of us are seeking to obey this admonition from Jude: "Be merciful to those who doubt" (verse 22)? I also wrote this book for the Deconstructing, because it's the book *I* needed fifteen years ago.

## 5. THE DEPARTED

The Deconstructed are not the same as the *Departed*. The Departed may use the term "deconstructed," but likely won't use the term "deconstructing," because they have closed the door on faith altogether. Sometimes this is done with a public, cocksure, and optimistic posture. Oftentimes, however, I find that people who have departed did not feel they had control over the process. They are often left confused and saddened. They weren't sure why they lost their faith, but they did.

Here is something to keep in mind with this group: It is

incredibly hard to keep your faith in a secular world. And by incredibly hard, I mean impossible, at least from a natural viewpoint. We live in what Catholic philosopher Charles Taylor calls a “disenchanted” world—a world where Christianity is assumed not to matter to the way we go about our lives. That sort of thinking can really get to a guy, you know? Add to that all the online voices giving credible sounding arguments against the Christian faith, and I find it miraculous that any of us Westerners have faith at all. Deconstructing folks are often listening to these publicly departed folks and have lots of questions: Why does God allow evil? Why do some of the Old Testament commands seem sexist or racist or violent? Can we really trust the form of the Scriptures in the way we’ve received them? All very important questions that people have been thinking about and answering for centuries.

But this is *not* an apologetics book, trying to dismantle the arguments of publicly departed folks like Abraham Piper, Rhett and Links, or Joshua Harris. Here’s why: Deconstructing and departed people tend to have a lot of intellectual hang-ups. But often, debates over these intellectual questions run in circles. That’s because the reason why many people latch on to these arguments *in the first place* is because they’ve become disillusioned with the Christian faith (or at least the version we’ve presented them). They no longer *want* to believe it or feel motivated to fight for it. Until we can re-enchant people with an ancient, global, hope-filled vision of faith, all of our good and important intellectual arguments will be an exercise in treading water.

Merely answering intellectual objections to faith with a deconstructor is like analyzing the merits of the *Mona Lisa* by scanning it with a microscope. There’s nothing wrong with this, of course. We could have all kinds of interesting conversations about the *Mona Lisa*’s origins, paint blends, materials, and so on. But none of those conversations would capture

the *Mona Lisa*'s enigmatic smile, her all-seeing gaze, and the curious sense of longing she evokes. It would be pretty ridiculous to hear two people debate the merits of the *Mona Lisa* and whether it is a masterpiece by looking at it only through a microscope. In fact, until we've seen the beautiful portrait as a whole, why would we be motivated to dig into those little details at all? This book, then, is less about scanning around Christianity to talk about its controversial bits. The first thing we need to do is zoom out and see its big, sweeping picture of Jesus's dreams for humanity.

Only then do we have a context for these other important conversations.

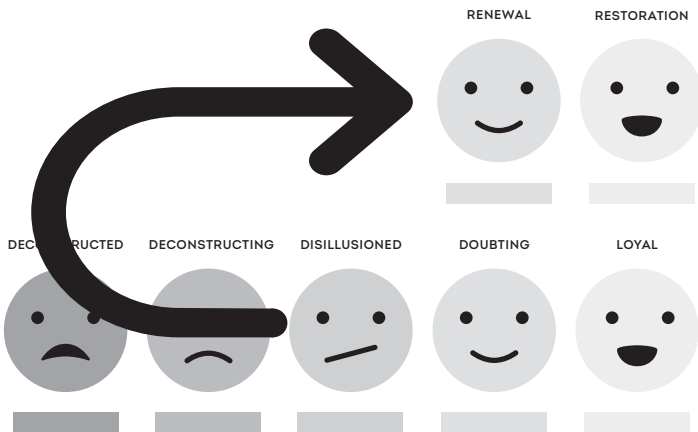
## MOVING FORWARD

Let me close with something surprising: I don't believe the Great Dechurching movement is all bad news—or even bad news at all. In fact, one of the reasons I love Redeemer Presbyterian in Indianapolis, where I'm an assistant pastor, is that Redeemer has a unique track record of helping the Deconstructing and Disillusioned find real healing and help. You may have read a bit about our work in *Walking Through Deconstruction*. If you visit our church, you're not going to find a typical evangelical atmosphere. We exist in the heart of a vibrant city, and our church is filled with weird art, songs you've never heard before, and quirky people of all ages. But it's also a haven for many who've felt left behind by Bully Evangelicalism. I'd guess at least half our congregation are folks who are disillusioned with American evangelical subculture and have probably been through some kind of deconstruction process. But they still maintain the convictions of "born again" Evangelicalism of the nineteenth century, committed to Jesus's atonement, the Scriptures' authority, and social activism.

Why are people disillusioned with American Evangelicalism attending—and finding renewal—at Redeemer? First and foremost, it's because of God's Spirit. But it's also because our church has a couple of characteristics they simply don't find elsewhere.

1. We're (way) out of step with American evangelical sub-culture.
2. We're hopeful about the future of the global, historic, evangelical church.

In other words, we allow people to experience their disillusionment and deconstruction, and in some measure, nearly all of us on staff share that. But we also urge people forward with a clear vision of participation in the global, historic church, as well as a hopeful and (I hope) compelling vision for following Jesus in our city. Rather than seeing people move from disillusionment into deconstruction, we've seen a new process take place:



This is, of course, not possible for everyone's story. Apostasy is real, and sometimes it can't be stopped no matter how gracious, winsome, or truthful we are. I've certainly wept and prayed over people who've abandoned their families or slunk into a drug-induced despair or publicly disavowed their faith on social media to a swell of shallow affirmation. But certainly there is a measure of wisdom that I've also seen gently invite folks beyond American Evangelicalism into the global, historic church where they can experience not "reconstruction"—since this bears all the same individualistic assumptions of deconstruction (we'll talk more about this later)—but renewal and restoration.

This book mirrors the process that I've experienced and that I've had the privilege to walk deconstructing Christians through. Part 1, "Deconstruction," focuses on cynical dreams of Bully evangelicals. Part 2, "Restoration," connects us back to an ancient, global, hope-filled vision of Christian faith. Part 3, "Jesus's Dreams," points to nine ancient, historic—but often neglected—practices for finding renewal and restoration. In this last section, I'll tell you stories of how I've seen these practices change the lives of the Loyal, Doubting, Disillusioned, and Deconstructing people I know and love . . . including my own life. So, if you identify with one of the categories above, this book is absolutely written for you. But it's also designed as a book to work through *alongside* those in the categories above . . . a tool I desperately wish I'd had over the past fifteen years of ministry, in the hundreds of conversations I've had—both on a college campus and in the local church—with students and church members who identify as Deconstructing.

There's a children's book I read to my youngest son every night about a family going on a bear hunt. This nutty family—who must have the Mercedes-Benz of life insurance plans—

keeps going through rivers and forests and fields to find a grizzly bear. Bizarre, right? I do think they have some sound advice, though, because when they get stuck, they sing:

We can't go over it,  
 We can't go under it,  
 We've got to go through it!<sup>9</sup>

Many conservatives have tried to go over the dechurching movement by taking back control of the White House, trying to enforce policies that give them a sense of nostalgia and security, and devoting hours to “studying” the issues by reading books and articles written by people who just so happen to look, think, and sound exactly like them. But this approach is actually accelerating secularism, not staving it off, as we'll see in the following chapter. On the other hand, many liberals have tried to go under the dechurching movement by adjusting their views on orthodoxy and ethics to accommodate the social moment. As Davis and Graham note, however, the mainline church in America is declining even more rapidly than the evangelical movement.<sup>10</sup>

We can't go over deconstruction through coercion and power. We can't go under it by catering to the cultural headwinds. We've got to go through it.

I've seen many people dechurch over the past several years; it's true. It's heartbreaking. But in that same time, I've also seen far more people come to Jesus than I've seen before. I truly believe that if we meet the moment right, this isn't the end of something. It's the beginning. My prayer is that all of us—the Loyal, the Doubting, the Disillusioned, the Deconstructing . . . and, yes, even the Departed—can move away from the cynical dreams of Bully Evangelicalism *and* progressive Christianity to embrace the dreams of Jesus. And I have

great hope that we will. As John Dickson goes on to say about the current fracturing of the American church,

I dare to think it's more likely to be a positive moment than a negative moment. Because I think of American evangelicalism as a giant that's fallen asleep in a bit of a fog. And if American evangelicals can pivot in this moment and work out the answers to those questions—What does it mean to lose well? What does it mean to be cheerfully confident without being brash and arrogant and manipulative and controlling?—I think it will bless America, and I think it will bless the world.<sup>11</sup>

Like Dickson, I'm critical of American evangelical subculture. But I'm also deeply hopeful. I wrote this book because it's the book I needed as a Loyal evangelical. It's also the book I needed as a Doubting, Disillusioned, and Deconstructing Christian. I didn't need condemnation. I needed hope. So whether you're Loyal, Doubting, Disillusioned, or Deconstructing, this book is for you. I don't want to yank you back into the Loyal category. I also don't want to send you into the self-destructive spiral of the Departed. Rather, to quote The Doors' lead singer Jim Morrison, I want you to "break on through to the other side."<sup>12</sup> I want you to see how the global, ancient vision of Christianity isn't about fear and cynicism. It's about experiencing, embodying, and extending the light of Jesus. Jesus's story is about restoring love, beauty, and freedom to the world. It's a story that frees us to dream again.

Jesus wants *you* to be restored.

Re-storied.