

## **Mike Allen**

As a very young man, you wrote a book that sold a million copies.

## **Joshua Harris**

Yeah it was called I Kissed Dating Goodbye, and that got a lot of attention because it was a radical idea. We shouldn't just not have sex, we should stop dating because dating is leading to these mistakes.

## **Mike Allen**

So the first time you kissed your wife was -

## **Joshua Harris**

At the altar. I got married about a year and a half after that book was released, and dove into

being a pastor, and worked in that space for 17 years.

## **Mike Allen**

And then this summer you went on Instagram and said ‘I don’t believe; by all the measures I have for defining a Christian, I’m not a Christian’. What did you mean by that?

## **Josh Harris**

I was just trying to be honest and say that all the ways I had defined faith and Christianity... I was no longer choosing to live according to those.

## **John Dickson**

That’s best-selling author and former pastor Joshua Harris, speaking with journalist Mike Allen about his deconversion from Christianity.

Harris shot to fame in 1997 when he released his controversial but uber-popular book *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*.

Just 22 years old when it was published—way too young to write a book!!!!—Harris advocated for the abandonment of traditional dating in favour of a more structured “courtship” process, including the (rather extreme) “no kissing before marriage” recommendation.

While the book received pushback in some corners of the Christian market - it catapulted Harris to prominence as the leader of a new generation of church leaders.

Then, in July 2019, Harris took to Instagram to make an announcement:

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*“I have undergone a massive shift in regard to my faith in Jesus. The popular phrase for this is **“deconstruction,”** and the biblical phrase is ‘falling away’.*

*“By all the measurements that I have for defining a Christian, I am not a Christian. Many people tell me that there is a different way to practice faith and I want to remain open to this, but I’m not there now.”*

## **John Dickson**

Breaks my heart ...

Harris’ announcement sent shockwaves through the worldwide evangelical community.

Here’s a popular and celebrated church leader - whose books were crucial for many people coming to and living a life of faith – rejecting the

whole thing... it was hard to get your head around.

But Harris is by no means the only one who's experienced deconstruction - in recent years.

The term "deconstruction" is a bit of a buzzword.

It was first coined by French philosopher Jacques Derrida, who adapted it from the work of Martin Heidegger... So it's deep ...

It refers to the act of "(exploring) the categories and concepts that tradition has imposed on a word, and the history behind them".

From this, it's becoming common to use 'deconstruction' to describe the process of re-evaluating the traditions of the Christian faith.

Musicians Kevin Max from DC Talk and Dustin Kensure from Thrice, former church leader Rob Bell, author Jen Hatmaker, and singer/podcaster

Michael Gungor are just a few of the more well-known public Christians who talk about their own deconstructions, with some now adopting the label “exvangelical”.

The trend is seeping down from the famous Christians to the average Christian in the pew.

One survey by Lifeway research study found that of the three-quarters of pastors who knew what deconstruction was, 27 per cent of them had seen someone they know go through it.

So, what’s going on?

If the claims of Christianity are solid - something *Undeceptions* is devoted to exploring - why are people questioning – and even dumping – the faith ... in droves?

We have two guests today ...

One has been tracking this trend closely and another who's seen deconstruction up close and personal.

And I guess we're going to deconstruct deconstruction.

I'm John Dickson, welcome to Season 10 of Undeceptions.

## **John Dickson (tape)**

A lot of my listeners who don't believe - they haven't even constructed, so they're not even thinking about deconstructing, but I think this will be an interesting conversation for them. Can you first give us a sense of what deconstruction is, and how you're approaching it?

## **Sean McDowell**

Well, that's one of the challenges because the word is equivocal, meaning that it can refer to a lot of different things.

Sometimes people think of deconstruction, how postmodernists would use the term like Derrida, which is kind of a literary technique in Postmodern kind of movements. That's one understanding of deconstruction that maybe gained some traction in the eighties, nineties and beyond.

## **John Dickson**

That's Sean McDowell, Associate Professor in the Christian Apologetics program at Talbot School of Theology at Biola University.

In addition to his academic day job, he's also a YouTuber, podcaster and writer, covering all areas of Christian advocacy, or what Americans call 'apologetics' (I hate that word, but I love Sean's approach and skill in the task).



His new book *Set Adrift: Deconstructing What You Believe Without Losing Your Faith* – was co-authored with his Biola colleague John Marriott – and it's out now.

## **Sean McDowell**

There's another sense where people talk about deconstruction in terms of losing and leaving your faith. Sometimes people say if you've deconstructed, you once had a faith, and you left it. That's not how I use it. I think to leave one's faith is to deconvert. The way John and I, my coauthor, used deconstruction refers to the breaking down.

To construct is to build back up. So somebody who has a certain amount of faith and goes to the period of questioning, goes to the period of doubt and says “What can I hold onto? What do I still believe and what do I get rid of”? - in some

ways, it's a natural process that everybody goes through to varying degrees.

## **John Dickson**

Derrida's type of *deconstruction* is complicated—he's a French philosopher, after all. But he was essentially destabilising any fixed meaning, fixed truth, suggesting that in the final analysis, many concepts and words are power structures, ways of forcing conformity to a tradition.

The analogy with Christian deconstruction is real.

Sean writes in his book, “The belief that one has reached the single, correct interpretation of reality provides a great excuse for condemning those who disagree with it. Those people then become marginalised, excluded, and oppressed.”

Deconstruction then – for Derrida (and in the Christian analogue) – explains away the tradition, it neutralises the power of the thing – and maybe causes the alleged truth behind the thing to vanish.

“Instead of being an actor in the play,” Sean writes of those deconstructing the faith, “they find themselves the critic in the audience, wondering if the version of the play they’re watching is reflective of what the playwright envisioned.”

But Sean and his co-writer aren’t dogmatic about this. They reckon deconstruction can actually be a good thing. Some stuff in the church is junk, mere tradition, or, more common nowadays, a mere fad recently added to the faith.

Deconstructing this stuff would be good. It’s like spiritual pruning.

But like pruning, you can sometimes cut off too much and the whole plant withers.

## **John Dickson (tape)**

There are a lot of people who are throwing away most of the construction though - especially in the US. It's a peculiar US phenomenon.

So what would you say are the main reasons people are questioning their constructed faith?

## **Sean McDowell**

Well, there are a lot of factors to this. So there's not just one reason somebody deconstructs, and you know this. Whenever I'm in conversation with somebody, I wanna try as best I can to get to the heart of the issue. I mean, there's a proverb that says the purposes in a man's heart are deep, and someone of wisdom draws it out.

So there tend to be a few things. Sometimes there are genuine intellectual questions, there are doubts about contradictions in the Bible, and the reconciliation of science and faith becomes an issue. Sometimes there's more tension with issues within culture. We're seeing this a lot with issues of sexuality and LGBTQIA+, meaning do I have to be bigoted and hateful towards my gay friends if I hold on to my faith? That tends to be a topic. What you see a lot, John, is church hurt. I mean, over and over again. I am just amazed that when I have conversations with people who either deconvert or have just gone through a period of deconstruction, there's hypocrisy that they've seen. There's spiritual abuse that they have experienced. There's disillusionment at the church. And sometimes that's personal. Sometimes that's looking more broadly. It's just how Christians carry themselves out many times, sadly, in the political arena. So that can be a piece of it. Another reason? There can just be, I think, pride issues.

So the bottom line is there can be emotional reasons. There can be intellectual reasons, there can be relational reasons, there can be spiritual reasons, moral reasons, and all sorts of others. But I think two things have kind of precipitated it today. Number one is just the vast amount of information at our fingertips.

So there's always been people who deconstruct. But the amount of information and the medium of different worldviews and challenges to the faith is unlike any generation before. So I think that has really helped to precipitate it. But there's also the sense now that everybody has to identify who they are and be unique and tell their story to the world. So if you have questions and doubts, you need to proclaim your story to the world. And the media focuses a lot more on stories that are more controversial.

So for example, a friend of mine, Bart Campolo, his father, Tony Campolo, and my dad Josh McDowell, two huge evangelical figures in the

eighties and nineties when Bart deconstructed and ultimately deconverted. There have been some stories about him because he bailed on the faith of his father. They haven't done a story on me. It's not as interesting to say. He holds very similar views as his dad. So I just think there are a lot of factors going on right now that seem to draw attention to this, unlike in the past.

## **John Dickson**

Bart Campolo, by the way, is an American humanist and speaker, who was once a Christian.

He's the son of famed pastor Tony Campolo who, among other things, served as the spiritual advisor to the Clinton administration in the 90s.

Like his Dad, Bart began his career in ministry, but following a near-death bike crash in 2011, he renounced his Christian faith.

He and his Dad have actually co-authored a book called *Why I Left / Why I Stayed*.

Along the way to renouncing God altogether, Campolo wrote a controversial article in *The Journal of Student Ministries*, noting:

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*"Some might say I would be wise to swallow my misgivings about stuff like God's sovereignty, wrath, hell,... remain orthodox, and thereby secure my place with God in eternity. But that is precisely my point: If those things are true, then God might as well send me to hell. For better or worse, I simply am not interested in any God but a completely good, entirely loving, and perfectly forgiving One who is powerful enough to utterly triumph over evil."*

**John Dickson**



Campolo's reasons for leaving the faith were primarily concerned with some of the church's key beliefs - he couldn't abide a God who would send people to hell; a god who didn't have the power to just save everyone.

That deserves a whole episode—which is why we're working on a whole episode ... on hell!)

But there are other issues that drive people away.

Research conducted in 2023 by Barna Research Group (a top social survey organisation in the US) found that the top instigators for deconstruction were:

- Hypocrisy or negative experience at the hands of other church members (27 per cent)
- Human suffering (23 per cent)

## **And**

- Broader problems in the world, such as natural disasters, or climate change (19 per cent)

Fascinatingly, only 7 per cent cited the lack of history behind the figure of Jesus as a reason to let go of the Faith.

## **John Dickson (tape)**

Do we have any data on just how many people are deconstructing?

## **Sean McDowell**

You know what's hard about the data is that do we really know how many people first believe or not? That's where it's difficult. So there are theological questions about people who leave. Did they ever first believe, and I'll tell you, John, In my experience, one of the questions that I

ask people who have deconverted, not just deconstructed, because that's again, a very different phenomenon.

One of the things I ask is I'll say, "I'm interested in your story, leaving the faith, but tell me when you came in, tell me about that moment where you knew that you were a sinner and you cried out to God for his grace?" I'm telling you, John, over and over again. It is the exception when somebody has an experience of an awareness of their sinfulness and an experience of God's grace.

Oftentimes people give another kind of experience coming in. So that's why when I look at deconversion statistics, I'm not sure we really know. We know that somebody may identify as a Christian and then don't anymore, but how many really were believers? That's where it gets just a little bit sticky to me.

And I, you know, I've seen studies of teenagers that lead their faith anywhere from like a third to two-thirds. I mean, there's a massive range of studies depending on how they're asked. And so I just don't know that I put a ton of stock in those. But it's certainly a concerning phenomenon and I think larger than a lot of people would like to admit.

### **John Dickson (tape)**

Am I right to get the sense that people are deconstructing principally because of, in Aristotle's terms, the ethos dimension, that is the sort of the moral credibility of the church that this is having a greater impact than say, you know, does God exist?

### **Sean McDowell**

It's really interesting you asked this question, John, because my father spent years, I mean, he wrote Evidence Demand's a Verdict in 1972

and has spoken on 1200 college campuses and he would tell me, he'd say, the biggest questions were "Christianity's not true". Give me evidence, prove it. And then you start to see this shift kind of bubbling up in the nineties and maybe early two thousands about Christianity being bigoted and intolerant and harmful. It's almost like the heart of the questions that shift from whether is Christianity true to whether is Christianity good. And you can almost argue is it beautiful? So in the minds of many people, not all. If Christianity's not good, I don't care if you think it's true or not, that's how a lot of people think. Now, I'm not saying that's how everybody thinks people still do care about truth today, despite what we're told in our post-truth culture.

But the way we're approaching religion, I think is far more through a lens of 'Is it good'? 'Is it harming society'? 'Is it beneficial versus is it objectively true'? Regardless of how I feel about it.

## **John Dickson (tape)**

I'm not sure if it's your experience, but in my experience, when I talk people through these sort of moral credibility questions and, you know, help them see things with more clarity, uh, if they really want to avoid Christianity, they all suddenly become so-called modernist and ask me "but is it true"? You know, it's like, they're looking for the escape and it's just interesting that there's a whole grab bag of, reasons to avoid the faith. At the moment, those to fore are the questions around, 'Is Christianity mean'?

## **Sean McDowell**

So people are still asking, is Christianity true? I have interaction with people and they're gonna ask, 'Well, I don't know, did Jesus or God rise from the grave'? But, as an example, and this is only one example, but I just did a Q&A with about 900 high school students who live in Washington DC for two hours, and the number

one topic I got asked about, period, was the larger LGBTQ conversation. It was not the age of the earth. It was not primarily, some of the questions that people were asking decades ago. This is the question young people are trying to figure out. “How do I love my neighbour? What does this mean for my faith? How do I navigate this world when these moral, ethical, and cultural questions are so different than when they were during the time of the New Atheism”?

You know, 10 to 12 years ago, I would've gotten primarily questions about science and faith, questions about evolution, you know, et cetera. So I think that conversation has shifted a little bit, and there are other shifts in there, but I think you're on to a big one that we're seeing with this younger generation.

## **John Dickson**

The shift from “Is Christianity true” to “Is Christianity good” has been a tricky one for

many Christian communicators - myself included - to grapple with.

For many people - and particularly (but not exclusively) young people - weighing up the Biblical stance on issues like sexuality, judgement, and the claim that there's only one God can be both complicated and deeply personal.

It makes people think Christianity is mean. 'Dumb and mean' is the perception many have of the faith.

But ... it's not all bad news.

## **Lecrae**

*Deconstruction has become synonymous with walking away from the faith. Deconstruction - atheism. I think it got popular around the time Michael Gungor went through what he was going through a few years back. He was going*



*through a lot of church hurt and he was like “I’m deconstructing, and I’m walking away from the faith”.*

*What I have seen is that people walk away or deconstruct because they have correlated this institutional corporate, culturally exclusive politicised version of the faith is married to Jesus, and they end up throwing the baby out with the bathwater.*

*I know because I did it too - that’s right, I deconstructed.*

## **John Dickson**

That’s Christian rapper Lecrae, in a clip posted on his YouTube channel back in 2022.

Lecrae is one of those “famous Christians” who recently delved into deconstruction.

However, he came away with a different perspective from that of some of his contemporaries.

## **Lecrae**

*I've been very fortunate to travel the world and realised that there are broken people everywhere, but also institutions that do not look like what we've created in America.*

*That's not to say that they're better, but they're different institutions with different struggles, and I began to realise that the struggles that we have are not necessary in other places. So I was able to see the difference between the Christ of the scriptures and the Christ that we've propped up, as a politicised, commercialised version.*

*I said, “I don’t want the politicised stuff, but I do want Christ, and I do want his church, and all of those particular things”.*

## **John Dickson**

For Lecrae, the process of deconstructing American *Christendom* was actually a good and helpful thing for his faith.

He was able to see who Jesus was *more* clearly, by discovering what he *wasn’t*.

This actually echos the method of *via negativa* or “negative way”, a technique applied by an honorary friend of the pod Thomas Aquinas, which involves exploring what god is **not** in order to get a better picture of who He **is**.

Aquinas writes in his *Summa Theologiae*:

*"We are unable to apprehend (the Divine substance) by knowing what it is. Yet we are able to have some knowledge of it by knowing what it is not."*

Lecrae and Aquinas ... boom!

## **John Dickson (tape)**

What are the ways in which this deconstruction process can be healthy?

## **Sean McDowell**

Yeah, I love that you asked this, and of course, this depends on what we mean by deconstruction. So some people mean deconstruction. There's a certain attitude and an anger and a hurt that motivates it. I'm not saying always, but I see that in some cases, if that's the case. Is not something I would characterize as primarily healthy, but if somebody's saying, I

gotta figure out what I believe and why, I gotta figure out what it means to be a Jesus follower, I've gotta separate tradition of just my upbringing from what Jesus really taught.

That's a very, very healthy thing, and I think all of us should go through that. So if we look in the mirror and are like, I believe exactly the same thing as my parents and my church, well maybe we haven't taken the time to really think through and expand our horizons and grow. So when young people come to me and say they're deconstructing their faith, or oftentimes they'll just say, "I have questions and I have doubts", and I'll say, "That's great. Good for you". And they'll kinda look at me like I'm nuts. And I'll say, "It's because you realize how important these questions are. You realize what's at stake and you're spending time thinking about it. These are the questions that are gonna shape your whole life. So I'm glad you wanna own your own faith".

And so I think we need to not be reactionary when people have these kinds of questions. If Christianity is really true, it can handle the toughest questions. It really can. And if you know kids in our era of just endless information, they're gonna have questions.

So some of the studies that I've seen out of this is, this is really younger millennials. Sticky Faith researchers Kara Powell and Chap Clark from Fuller Seminary would say it's not questions and doubts that hijack a faith. It's unexpressed questions and unexpressed doubt. So when kids express their doubt and they express their questions, in some ways they're developing a more mature, robust, real faith.

## **John Dickson (tape)**

And it is the case, isn't it? That, that not all churches are cool with people questioning

## **Sean McDowell**

It's kind of a painful question, John. I mean, I have so many conversations with people because of this, this book that's coming out. I've decided I'm gonna talk with a lot of people who have deconstructed and or deconverted their faith and just hear their stories. And one common theme over and over again is just my parents or my church or, you know, the Christians in my life did not invite questions.

They shot it down. And you know, parents and pastors can do this for different reasons.

Sometimes they're probably doing what they think is best and trying to help. But if you're having real questions, That's not a helpful response. I mean, a good friend of mine, oh my goodness, he went through a period of doubting his, his name's Preston Ulmer.

He does these things called doubters clubs, where he invites Christians and non-Christians to come together and simply have

conversations, they listen to each other and they challenge ideas, but it's respectful. He went through a painful, doubting period. One of the things his youth pastor said was “Sleep on the Bible”.

He goes, “Just sleep on it”. And somehow like osmosis, it's supposed to like infuse into his body. And I hear that and I'm thinking “There's no one who said that. That's ridiculous”. I'm sure the youth pastor was trying to help, but I hear these kinds of stories over and over again and it makes me grieve. 'Cause if there's any religion that can take tough questions and should invite tough questions. Like you said, it's Christianity and as a whole, we just don't do a great job of doing so.

## **John Dickson**

I find it sad that expressing sentiments of doubt or deconstruction will often lead to serious



blowback from their church community, which isn't always awesome with the topic of doubt!!

The church (or pastors specifically) can be jealous of the truth, zealous to maintain the Faith, and maybe just a little bit insecure in secularising times. And that can lead to a culture that won't abide doubt. This vibe is huge in cults, but it shouldn't be present in a community grounded in Jesus Christ.

Many of our Undeceptions heroes - from Origen to Augustine, from Bede to Alcuin of York, from Aquinas to Kierkegaard, and many others ... were all deconstructors, in the good sense.

They asked searing questions – intellectual and emotional –and sought to separate tradition from truth, mere fads from the eternal Faith.

Go back and listen to our recent Kierkegaard episode, Blind Faith – that man was a total

deconstructor but he ended up with a zeal that I find inspiring.

Speaking of someone I find inspiring, after the break, I'm joined by lovely Chad Gardner, frontman of the American rock band Kings Kaleidoscope.

His band was connected with Mars Hill Church, a megachurch implosion if ever there was one.

It left a long trail of hurt and distrust. It was a catalyst, understandably, for some tragic deconstruction – and also for some reconstruction!

Stick around.

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**\*\*\*BREAK\*\*\***

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## **Chad Gardner**

I definitely think of us as a Christian band because we primarily are making music that's about faith to encourage other people in their faith. So it feels, I mean, that's what we're trying to do. It's specific. It's not just, you know, making songs about anything. I pretty much only have ever written about faith.

## **John Dickson**

That's Chad Gardner, founder, songwriter, and lead singer, of the acclaimed rock band Kings Kaleidoscope (Kings K for short).

Chad has toured the world with his band, playing and singing songs that deal with his faith journey, and he does it to thousands of people every night.

The band's 2019 record *Zeal* deals directly with our theme of deconstruction, with many songs reflecting Chad's own shifting beliefs, as well as those of his friends and bandmates.

Chad wears his heart on his sleeve. I found him inspiring. Without the philosophical language, he was pretty Kierkegaardian!

## **Chad Garnder**

I'm very collaborative, and it takes really close friends who are often co-writing with me to help really reflect back to me what actually is going on in my life and what, where sort of the nuggets of truth are being found that I can write into songs. And then, on the roadside, it is hard, and every night is different.

Some nights, some songs I really feel like I'm connecting with and on other nights, there are other songs I'm connecting with. There's really

no way to tell. Last week there was a song that usually I can just kind of get through but in the middle of the song, I just, the lyric hit me and I just started crying and I couldn't even sing it. And everybody afterwards in the band was like, “Oh my gosh, Chad, what happened? We could barely finish that song. What happened to you”? And it's like, “I don't know”.

Sometimes the lyrics for certain songs meet me where I'm at. on that particular day and they end up being sort of, yeah, more emotional or I end up feeling them more alive.

## **John Dickson**

Kings K was formed in 2010, with members attending Mars Hill Church, at the University of Washington campus.

Some of our listeners will be familiar with Mars Hill.

It was a huge multi-site megachurch, based in Seattle and co-founded - most famously - by Mark Driscoll.

Mark was renowned for his straight-shooting, no-compromise approach to the Bible, and he was behind a huge church-planting movement around the world.

True story. When he first came out to Australia in (I think 2008), I spent a morning with him in Sydney, and I even asked him: If I ever wanted to plant a church, would he be open to my becoming part of his movement? He was open to it until he learned that I reckon women should be giving sermons in church. “That’s not a good fit,” he said.

Fair enough!

Driscoll resigned from his post as lead pastor (six years later) in 2014, following reports of ...

well, you can easily chase the reports. It's all pretty depressing.

The entire Mars Hill church disbanded a few months later, at the start of 2015.

*Christianity Today* has an incredible podcast that goes into all of this, called *The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill*. Link in the show notes for that.

In this environment, Chad started Kings K while he was working as a worship pastor—that's the pastor looking after the praise music in church.

He left Mars Hill in 2013, just a year before the spiralling collapse of the church.

The fallout from the church's closure was substantial, and many former leaders have since undergone public deconstruction, with some sadly walking away from their faith altogether.

All of this to say - Chad is familiar with today's topic, having walked alongside it.

I asked him to give us his reflections on this chapter of his career.

And just a heads up; Chad mentions CCM, which stands for Christian Contemporary Music. It's a massive genre of popular music, especially in the US, where its market share in the music industry is bigger than jazz and classical music combined!

## **Chad Gardner**

I grew up going to church my whole life. I was very involved in it and early on I'd say like, you know, 13, 14 I kind of knew that I wanted to do something in the, music space that was very alternative to what sort of, you know, CCM and



kind of the American music industry, the Christian music industry had to offer.

And so Mars Hill was very attractive to me at that point. It was a church in Seattle, it was a big mega-church and everything they were doing was sort of, um, On the edges or like the tip of the spear, they were writing all their own music. They were arranging all their own hymns.

And so it was like a perfect, for me, I was very much creatively curious about it.

So basically that's what happened when I was when I was 21 I interned there and then got a job there, and left when I was 25 before the church had a very public implosion. But during that time, you know, I was worship directing and leading worship every Sunday and starting to arrange hymns, you know, doing a little bit of writing, but really I was only kind of arranging all the other worship pastor songs or rearranging hymns.

If I could sum it up, I would say of all the things that happened to Mars Hill, good and bad, the thing that it primarily did for me was it was a sort of like a creative incubator and a really good environment for just sort of like pushing against the boundaries of what sort of popular church music was at the time.

So I'm grateful for it.

### **John Dickson (tape)**

Did all that happened there dent your faith?

### **Chad Gardner**

I mean, it's hard sometimes I feel bad saying this, but no.

I just mean it's, it's a very hard thing for a lot of people and a lot of people have very real church hurt from mega churches and big institutions. But I think, so, I mean, it was very difficult, right?

My wife and I met to plant a church for Mars Hill on the college campus, helping with that team.

And then we, our first three years of marriage were in that environment. It was very hard on us. But as far as my personal faith in Jesus, I went into that situation with a sort of solidly grounded faith. I didn't become a Christian in that environment. And so when that blueprint sort of was shown for what it was, it was like, this is actually not all that there is in the world of faith.

And that sort of got ripped up and torn out and thrown away. I still had enough of my own blueprint of faith that that was okay. And I will say, I'm grateful to God for this, even though it was brutal. But the week that my wife and I resigned, the week we left a series of really hard things happened, which actually forced us into prayer and looking to God. My wife got in a car accident. Her father was diagnosed and passed away from cancer within 10 weeks. We lost our

first son to a stillbirth. We lost another family member and this was all within, I think five or six months.

That was right after we left. So in a sense, whatever would have happened where we were like, “What is church and what is faith and what is real about God?” things got so hard in a very real way, specifically around death that I honestly just feel like the Lord gifted us the gift of faith for those things.

And that overtook what could have happened with the bitterness and jadedness. Then after that healing, we circled around and looked around and were like, “Wow. A lot of our friends are seriously struggling and it's understandable why”. We sort of ended up making a record about that as well called Zeal.

But personally, it was more like I understood it. I understood that there was sin and that, you

know, human institutions fail all the time for a lot of reasons.

## **John Dickson**

I asked Chad why – despite the struggle – he chose to remain in church after it all.

## **John Dickson (tape)**

Tell me, you know, to what degree have you personally experienced any kind of deconstruction? You've already hinted that you saw some of your friends go down that path.

## **Chad Gardner**

The environment of the mega-church that I was a part of for a few years was very sure of itself. There wasn't very much nuance. It was, it was in a sense, even competitive with other, perspectives of Christianity and, in a sense, that actually became sort of the cornerstone and the

foundation of a lot of my friend's faith, and maybe mine in some ways for a time. But, as I said, you know, I had had a decent amount of life before being in that environment where I was familiar with praying. I was familiar with my relationship with God on my own. So when that foundation sort of fell out from under the whole church, I just did see a lot of friends who, if that had been their, initiation into belief that was sort of what caused a lot of questions. So I wouldn't say like, I mean, I'm sure I have deconstructed a lot of those things. It wasn't a conscious effort for me. It was more like a very clear realization. I also think that working on staff at a church like that, you see it earlier.

So a lot of my deconstructing of like, “All right, this is not real Christianity” or, “this is a sort of a twist on this” - I think that was happening naturally just with me and my friends on staff where We were seeing that for a couple of years coming down the pipeline. It didn't all hit like an

explosion when the church decided to shut down and all of that.

But I could feel the impact of that explosion on most of my close friends, especially a lot of the people in the band. So my proximity to it is sort of my experience of it, rather than like a personal wrestling with it so much. And once again, I have the posture of being a kid that was raised in the church that also had a pretty, you know, serious panic attack disorder my whole life, especially as a child, different waves of anxiety disorder.

And that posturing has left me feeling very needy often like I want to commune with God. I want to believe in God even when it feels hard. I don't like the feeling of tearing that idea of God apart because I've relied on it so heavily. So in a way, I want to say that maybe some of the suffering that God has allowed me to go through has actually helped me be more resilient within

the sort of, like I said, proximity or environment of deconstructing God and faith and church.

### **John Dickson (tape)**

I mean, that's an incredibly important insight that you, in response to your anxiety and the sense of neediness that you mentioned, a lot of artists have .... many find their vitality from an audience or - you know, from fans, from, from the church structure or whatever. And, you've just said, you've gone straight to the thing that doesn't change, God himself.

### **Chad Gardner**

Some of that stuff was actually really helpful to me.

### **John Dickson (tape)**

Yeah. But am I right that some of your mates from those days have walked away from the faith?



## Chad Gardner

Yeah for sure. Some of the people that were in the band and I will say, I mean, I don't know how much to really talk about it except for that for most of them, they're, you know, like they know the Bible, they're well educated in it. They studied it sometimes more than me.

In one sense or angle, I have, this is a broad brush to a lot of people that I know, but it almost feels like there is an over-intellectualizing of the gospel and their relationship with Jesus, and less of a relationship that had sort of a, like a deeper emotion to it.

And I know that sounds a little trivial or like nebulous, but a lot of people were, attracted to Mars Hill because they sort of banged this drum of “We are theologically sound. We are the strongest theology in the world”. You know, I mean, geez, like I remember being 19 and getting like, you know, Grudem's systematic

theology and like sitting around and reading that for whatever that was worth, you know, because that's what legit Christians do.

And so then all of a sudden when the leader has a big failure and sort of those tropes, you can't really stand on them. That's a different type of faith than a, like I said, just like a neediness or a longing or like a love for God ... that's the kind of faith that I've been trying to nurture in my life life is hard.

There's suffering, there's huge questions. This is a mystery. I don't have all the answers, but I want to love God and I want to feel God's love in me abiding with him throughout this journey with all the questions in the world. And so, I often just sort of think about my friends that are struggling and it feels very much in their heads. What I want to say to them sometimes is, "Okay, I understand that you have like huge theological questions and like huge problems with the church. And actually, pretty much every

Christian could agree with you on a lot of those things. As you can see there are clearly problems and there's, there's clearly mystery that you're not going to solve.

“But if you're taking all of this time to, read books to like unpack things or listen to podcasts that are helping you unpack things. What if you took that hour every day and just sat in silence and prayer or what if you took that hour every day and sat with one section of Scripture and meditated on it?

Because I feel like that side of the relational, and honestly, I'm just going to say it like prayer with God, that really changes things. Like where's the energy going? If the energy is going to untangling things, you're kind of going to be left completely untangled. Redirecting that energy from deconstructing resources into just honestly, like just try it if you're going to go.

If this is that important, what if you spend an hour a day in prayer for a month and see what the Lord has for you? That's honestly where I would go.

## **5 MINUTE JESUS**

Let's press PAUSE ... I've got a 5-minute Jesus for you.

A doubter came to Jesus once hoping for healing for his son:

Jesus said (this is in Mark 9, by the way),  
“Everything is possible for one who believes.”  
The boy's father replied, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!”

The man is a doubter. And I think there are some important things to say about doubt, before noticing how Jesus treated this doubter.

There are different kinds of doubt.

Some doubts are neutral, some are problematic, and some are even kind of positive.

*In the neutral category, I would place ...*

(1) Intellectual doubt: when our confidence wanes because of (what seems like) a compelling counter-argument.

Intellectual doubt isn't necessarily bad (it's just an intellectual response to the challenge).

Perhaps a really smart friend beats us in an argument ...

Perhaps we saw some History Channel documentary ... or Washington Post Xmas article claiming something shocking.

We shouldn't feel bad about these doubts.

We should just do what Luke says he did in research material for his Gospel. In his opening

sentence, he says: “I have carefully investigated everything.”

Over the years I've become convinced there is NO QUESTION you could raise against Christianity ... that hasn't been comprehensively answered by some nerd in some book in some library somewhere.

Some doubts aren't so neutral—because some doubts aren't even intellectual.

(2) “Moral doubt”: doubting because we want to live/think contrary to Christianity.

I have met many people over the years who present as having doubts

But, after some self-analysis, they admit that, really, they are trying to relieve cognitive dissonance between what Xity says and what they want to do/think.

Instead of doubting themselves (and their motives), they doubt Christianity.

It might be doubting what the Bible says about sex because we don't *like* what the Bible says about sex.

It could just as easily be doubting what Jesus said about money/poor because we want to pursue wealth.

The answer to moral doubt is to learn to doubt our doubts.

There's another kind of doubt that emerges from a positive place.

(3) "Psychological doubt": This is a protective trick our minds play on us when we consider deeper commitment.

It is a natural psychological mechanism to keep us from risky behaviour.

It's 'cold feet' people get before their wedding day!!

It's the doubt I experience every time I hop on a plane (I know the plane's not going to crash —yet, I know the plane's going to crash!!!!)

What's going on there?

It's the mind playing “pass protection.”

So much hangs on the truth of something (or the stability of the aircraft I flew on this morning), that I don't allow myself fully to trust it.

A similar psychological doubt can arise when thinking about a deeper level of commitment.

So much hangs on the truth of Christ—the stakes are so great—our mind says, “Are you sure, are you *really* sure!?”

We shouldn't feel guilty about this kind of doubt.

We should recognise it for what it is ... relax ... and take the next small step in the right direction.



This is why we find some tender-hearted statements about doubt in the Bible.

Jude 22-23. Be merciful to those who doubt.

Perhaps this is intellectual doubt, perhaps psychological doubt, perhaps doubts arising from disappointment/hardship.

Christ has 'mercy' for these; so should Christians; and so should you on yourself!

And this brings me back to Jesus.

True faith shouldn't be confused with intellectual certainty.

I mean, you can be certain of the truth of God and NOT have Christian faith!

True Christian faith isn't intellectual agreement that something is true; it is *trusting our lives* to the One revealed in the gospel.

So, it's possible for someone to have NO doubts about Christianity ... and still NOT have trusted themselves to the Lord.

Equally, it is also possible for someone to experience doubts ... and, yet, still have genuine Christian faith.

We are not saved or doomed by the fluctuations in cognitive belief.

The man who came to Jesus for the healing of his son cried out: Mark 9:24. "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"

You just have to read the rest of Mark 9 to see that Jesus does what his brother Jude years later recommended.

Jesus was merciful to those who doubt (of course, Jude no doubt picked this idea up from his brother).

Jesus healed the man's son, even though the man didn't quite believe it could happen.

So, if you're a doubter ... don't fret ... don't deny the doubts.

Relax ... take a deep breath ... assess what kind of doubt it is ...

And then say to Christ, "Help me overcome my unbelief"

And see what happens.

You can press PLAY now.

## **John Dickson (Tape)**

Some of my sceptical listeners, you know, will hear this conversation about Christians deconstructing, and they may have heard the news reports about, you know, people abandoning the faith, and their response will be, "Yeah, obviously Christianity's just so fragile, you know, if so many people are deconstructing and then deconvert Christianity just can't hack it". What would you say?

## Sean McDowell

I would say for every person who deconstructs, there are dozens and dozens who are faithful. There won't be stories about them. They won't make the news because who wants to hear a story about a pastor of 150 people who is faithful in teaching the Bible and holds onto his faith? Not very interesting. So I just did a show recently, and it actually took off.

I didn't expect it on YouTube, about a former megachurch pastor who wrote a book called *Goodbye, Jesus*.

## John Dickson

*Goodbye, Jesus* is a book by former megachurch pastor Tim Sledge, who served for nearly 40 years as a leader in the Southern Baptist movement, before renouncing his faith.

His reason? He writes:

*“After living and leading in the church for decades, I saw no consistent evidence of an ongoing supernatural presence—and I wanted to see that evidence with all that was in me.”*

Sean discusses the book at length with his Biola University colleague Scott Rae on the *Think Biblically* podcast. We'll put a link in the show notes.

## **Sean McDowell**

I mean, it was last, I checked like a couple hundred thousand views. Somehow it hit a nerve with people and it's a pretty dramatic story. And I just feel for this former megachurch pastor who's he's now an atheist and he is now outspoken.

But I think his story's traumatic and people see it and have the response that you say, but I know dozens and dozens and dozens of small and large church pastors who are faithful and who

are following. So it's easy to focus on the dramatic stories that get press and miss the majority of what's going on.

But second, my faith is not rooted in whether or not others follow the faith. It would certainly take a hit on me, John, if my dad or other heroes I look up to left their faith, that would affect me. But I've asked myself a lot, why do I believe? Why am I a Christian? And I can tell you I'm a Christian because I think it's true.

I don't put my faith in human beings because I've let people down and every human being is going to let you down except Jesus. So for a pastor who says that, I'd say three things. I'd say number one, that's understandable. There are a lot of Christians who are leaving the faith, so I get it.

Why you would feel that way? I'd say second, there's a lot more who stay faithful than who do not. And third, what really matters is, is

Christianity true? Don't let seeing somebody walk away from their faith allow you to dismiss a faith tradition with deep philosophical, historical, and scientific truths.

You've still got to wrestle with the question 'Who is Jesus'?

## **John Dickson**

Everyone has their own things to deconstruct.

For some, it might be deconstructing structures and fads and bad arguments.

For others, it'll involve rebuilding a sense of what it means to go to church, and what meeting on a Sunday should look like.

For others still, it might be about grappling with the ethics of Christianity; why are certain things commanded, and what does that mean about how we live out our faith in the world?

Deconstructing will be scary for some, and necessary and even overdue for others.

However, I don't believe it's something threatening the claims of Christianity.

If it helps someone attain a more realistic picture of God (Aquinas style) then I'm all for it.

Yet, I recognise, that deconstruction can be tragic. It can be the complete undoing of the Faith—throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

I find that heartbreaking.

But I still think asking questions, and churches creating a culture of asking questions, are vital things for a flourishing Christianity.



I ended by asking my guests—as I often do—what all this has to do with the doubters in my audience.

## **John Dickson (tape)**

The person who's listening, who is deconstructing, you know, they, they have a memory of being a true Christian and they've loved loving God, but now they're, they just, they aren't sure. The questions are plentiful. The ethical questions, intellectual questions ... I guess it'd be good to end if you can just give your best advice to someone who's just hanging on to the Christian faith by their fingertips.

## **Sean McDowell**

I love that you asked that question because in some ways I was there in my life a number of years ago. My co-author was there, and that's exactly what motivated me to write this book. I get asked that question all the time and it was

like, I just gotta write a book to help people. So here, I'd say a couple of things.

I'd say, number one, you're not alone. You're not alone. You might feel alone. You might not have the support around you, but I hear from dozens and dozens of people in your shoes, so you are not alone. Second, there are answers. I'm convinced if we're willing to find them. There are answers that are out there. Christianity has a rich tradition of answering the toughest questions, and I'm a believer because I think it's true, so there are answers.

Third, I would encourage you to try to get to the root of what it is. I cited that proverb earlier. About, uh, the purposes in a man's heart are deep and a man of wisdom draws it out.

Maybe it is intellectual questions, maybe it's emotional. Maybe there's spiritual abuse that is there. I would really encourage you maybe through a counsellor, or through a trusted

Christian friend. To try to get to the heart of it. What is it that really triggered you and caused you to question things in your faith and realize that there are a lot of people who go through questioning and come back with a stronger, more firm faith because they shed away secondary things that aren't essential?

And yet when people do that, sometimes the faith that they land in is a little bit different than the one that they started with, and that's okay. Christianity has a big tent within certain essential beliefs. Give yourself some space within the essentials of the faith to wrestle with some of these secondary things and allow yourself to ask these questions.

And I think the last thing I would say, this is probably more than I should have given, but Jude says, have mercy on those who doubt. I remember doubting. And it's painful. It's not just an intellectual exercise. It hurts. And I just say, that God loves you, and God's grace is there

with you. There are believers that I hope are in your life that'll just listen to you and support you and care for you through this because it can be a heavyweight.

You know what, one last thing, John, I'm sorry. The last thing I would say is don't do it alone. You cannot do it alone. That is a recipe for disaster.

So find other believers you trust and talk with them and pray with them and get support. This is not meant to be a one-man or one-woman journey. Get some others in your life to process this with them.

**John Dickson**

And here's a final word from Chad Gardner.

**Chad Gardner**

I believe that seeing the world through the lens that it is wild and dangerous and untamed and I want to use the word enchanted is a better life than something that can be sterilized and sort of boxed off and, sort of controlled. And the way that I experienced that through faith has led me to feel, and I'm going to say emotionally more alive, than at any other point in my life.

That's not even an argument. It's not an intellectual argument. It's just the experience of life for me is greater. Living inside the mystery of the gospel, utterly dependent and reliant on God, and then sort of trying to solve it all. I don't have joy living that way. And I have seen other people continuously try to solve it all.

It seems like it's an endless cul de sac of doubt, reassurance, doubt, reassurance, doubt, reassurance on like trying to take new ground and, you know, figure it all out. And so I guess my thing to them would just be ... I'd want to just be their friend and just have them sort of live

alongside me and see how we handle life coming at us in a different way.

I just think the experience of life is more beautiful with God.