

# Counseling in a Season of Faith Deconstruction



by MICHAEL GEMBOLA

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Often in counseling, I've recommended a crisis hotline to people whose lives are at risk. But when a person's faith is at risk, Christian counselors often become the crisis line.

Let me use a story to illustrate how a crisis of faith can start.

James is twenty-two and comes to you for counseling. He grew up in a Christian home, and most of his Christian fellowship and discipleship centered around his work as part of a large youth outreach ministry at a church. He spent lots of time with the other youth leaders, and he especially looked up to the director of the ministry.

Later in college, as he got closer to the inner circle of leaders, he saw how meetings were handled and came to believe that the director was a bully and that some of his behaviors amounted to sexual harassment. The leader's considerable public gifts were not matched with humility and integrity in his private interactions, especially toward the female staff. James and others shared their concerns through the proper channels, but the director was well-defended and nothing was done. Over time, it

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became clear that those who raised the concerns (including James) were being seen as “the problem.”

James cries easily when he talks about these things, but he is not just hurt. The hypocrisy of the director and the complicity of the other leaders has shaken his confidence. He trusted them and now feels disoriented. Looking back, he wonders if there were dynamics in the church culture that made it easier for this kind of thing to happen. Did prizing charismatic leadership lead them to overlook character issues? Did the way the church talked about gender make the director’s behavior seem less offensive? His questions expand like a crack in the ceiling that keeps growing. He becomes more attuned to other critiques of the church that he hears from his friends and sees online. And he finds himself thinking about other issues, some of which are quite different, but still feel connected. If these leaders were so confident about events that proved to be so harmful, is that same dynamic happening for other areas where they spoke equally confidently—like race relations, sexual ethics, and politics? Were they wrong about those things, too?

What began as a painful experience is now a much larger set of doubts. James is deconstructing his faith.

*Deconstructing* is a common-language term for a season when a believer is disillusioned and is questioning either the Christian faith as a whole or a particular version of that faith. On social media, the experience of deconstruction is either feared or mocked, opposed or affirmed, taken seriously as a problem, or sold for a literal price as a facilitated process. In the history of the church, this is not a novel experience, but it is a current trend among believers young and old.<sup>1</sup> For those of us who provide care to others, it is both a privilege and a significant responsibility to walk with people through these challenging seasons.

Anything that shakes up the faith of believers is certainly worth attending to, but the term *deconstruction* is itself of limited value. Although originally used as a term in literary criticism, it is now used in evangelical or post-evangelical circles in a way that is closer to a secondary meaning. Merriam-Webster’s online dictionary defines *deconstruction* as “the

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1. Timothy Keller, “Reconstructing Faith: Christianity in a New World,” *Life in the Gospel*, Fall 2022, <https://quarterly.gospelinlife.com/reconstructing-faith/>.

analytic examination of something (such as a theory) often in order to reveal its inadequacy.” But that still doesn’t fully capture the way the word is used in the context of faith struggles. Ian Harber explains it this way:

Deconstruction isn’t a process you can warn people to avoid or encourage people to do. It’s a crisis that happens to you. You don’t wake up and decide to deconstruct your faith. You’re deconstructing before you realize it...It doesn’t feel like a calm and level-headed process of examination. It feels like the existential rug being pulled out from under you. You can’t avoid it and you can’t choose it.... It’s neither a rational process of examination or a slippery slope to atheism. It’s a crisis someone experiences.<sup>2</sup>

Although there is an intellectual component, deconstruction is not a dispassionate time of reflection or doubt. It can feel like a sudden loss of confidence, or a time of unmooring, often in response to an ethical concern when faith traditions or the behavior of faith leaders seems at odds with what otherwise seems morally right. Others slide away more incrementally from where they were. Sometimes this results in leaving the church altogether and deciding that they do not believe that the Christian faith is true. Some call this experience *fully deconstructing*, but for clarity, I’ll refer to this as *deconversion*. However, the loss of faith is only one possible result of a time of crisis and disillusionment.<sup>3</sup>

The problem I’m seeking to address, then, is not the narrower issue of deconverting, but the “dark night of the soul” more generally. Regardless of the outcome of this season, the struggle usually involves disillusionment, disorientation, disconnection, and a sense of loss. It calls for patient care that is grounding and orienting, that nurtures a connection to God and others, and invites a way forward.

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2. Ian Harber (@ianharber) *Twitter*, February 23, 2022, <https://twitter.com/ianharber/status/1496509425603026945>.

3. The terms I am using are not perfectly distinct or stable in meaning. “Dechurching, disenculturation, and deconstruction are three unique ideas whose Venn Diagram has *some* overlap but also have their own unique characteristics,” Skyler Flowers and Michael Graham, “One Year Later: Reflecting on Evangelicalism’s Six-Way Fracturing,” *Mere Orthodoxy* (blog), July 12, 2022, <https://mereorthodoxy.com/one-year-later-reflecting-on-evangelicalisms-six-way-fracturing/>.

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