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# Deconstructing Faith and A Disorienting Community

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GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

DECONSTRUCTING FAITH AND A DISORIENTING COMMUNITY

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO  
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DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY

SCOTT SCRIVNER

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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DMin Dissertation

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has been approved by  
the Dissertation Committee on February 24, 2016  
for the degree of Doctor of Ministry in Semiotics and Future Studies.

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## PROLOGUE

. . . there is no way to “return to the faith of your childhood,” not really, not unless you’ve just woken from a decades-long and absolutely literal coma . . . whatever faith you emerge with at the end of your life is going to be not simply affected by that life but intimately dependent upon it, for faith in God is, in the deepest sense, faith in life—which means that even the staunchest life of faith is a life of great change. It follows that if you believe at fifty what you believed at fifteen, then you have not lived—or have denied the reality of your life.

- Christian Wiman, *My Bright Abyss*

## DEDICATION

To Leslie, again, you went there with me. I dreamed of a doctorate of writing and of telling our story of faith and community and you never—not once—offered less than your full support. Even when we started the new design business in the midst of the second year of my doctorate, you did not fail to continue to cheer me on. I am a better man because of you—your grace, your love, and your belief in me. You have always seen in me what I have doubted in myself. Your love, your voice, and your presence in my life has given me eyes to see God saturating our life.

To Matthew & Meredith, in so many ways this work I have been doing is for you—for your generation. I pray that what we are working out within our community of faith, our household of faith, will be your inspiration to always be in process, working out what it is to love God, love others, and love yourselves. It is an endless pursuit, but so very worth it. Thank you for the patience you have shown me through all the times I have had my headphones on, writing away—I hope you know that I was always torn between what I needed to get done and spending time with you. Thank you for the cheerleading you have given me through the process. You two have been such an encouragement to keep this work going to the finish.

To my parents—Mom and Dad, you have always been so incredibly supportive, even if you weren't so sure about the direction I was headed. This book and my education has been an outflow of the foundation of love and support you continue to forge in my life. Jeanie, you put up with so much from me--thank you for your excitement for Convergence and your love for me. I love you three, and am thankful to be your son (and son-in-law).

To Convergence, I wish I could name you all here, you have been both the story and proving ground I have returned to time and again to work out a deconstructing faith. Our conversations, our journey, our failures, and our successes have found a presence in this writing. My life with Christ would never have been as whole without our shared life. Thank you for the patience you have shown me--and the story you have helped shape. I pray our shared story might encourage all who read this. Gary & Kathryn and Daran & Rachelle, so many of the words in this work have come out with your involvement and investment and inspiration throughout our shared community endeavor. I hope and pray you see your influence throughout this book. Neither this book, nor Convergence could possibly exist without the dreams, presence, and passion you have shared for it.

To Len and the entire George Fox family. The last two and a half years have been some of the most inspiring, mind-opening, and encouraging times of my life. My faith and practice in ministry have seemed so foreign to many over the past decade, but you all embraced me and spoke a language that seemed very much at home. The cohort I had the opportunity to join and live with over the years has changed my life. I am thankful for each one of you—the way you shed new light on ancient truths, the way you pushed back within loving conversations, and the way you found a way to always speak grace—even in differences. What an amazing time we all shared. I'm sad to see it end. But I will carry it with me, continuing my hope for the church . . . and a deconstructed faith.

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## ABSTRACT

Life does not go as planned. It can be both brighter and more tragic than expected, and probably even both, all at once. I have felt deeply the moments my expectations were not met in my life. My faith is one of those things greatly affected by such brokenness and beauty in life. After years in ministry and years practicing my faith, I have found that the church is too often not a space to work through the disorientation that comes when one's understanding of life conflicts with one's actual experience of life. Instead of making room for this kind of struggle to be worked out, the church often offers clichéd resolutions and the pressure to ignore the doubt, questions, and in-between-ness that come with such disorientation. A friend of mine recently posted the following to Facebook:

When I started having my doubts and questions, I didn't really have anywhere to go with them. I tried bringing things up with my coworkers and friends, but it didn't seem like anyone cared – or had any idea what to do about it. So, I became very isolated in many ways. That transitioned into a long, dark period of depression, to the point of having suicidal thoughts. When I finally walked away, I had no idea what to do next . . .<sup>1</sup>

This is happening over and over again for so many people. So, I have set out to study ways to integrate deconstruction philosophies into the Christian faith in the context of the community life. I am asking, how can a community of faith make space for also losing a version of faith, space to go through disorientation, and not be threatened by doubts, questions, and struggles, but offer a way toward greater hope, an increased fidelity to Christ, and a deeper bond within community? I am finding in my own

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<sup>1</sup> Rob Davis' Facebook page, accessed May 26, 2015, <https://www.facebook.com/robdavisisme/posts/1453503741616030>. Used by permission.



community experience that building in language and practices of deconstruction actually brings a renewed life to faith. In ritualizing the loss of faith, being present with others in their disorientation, and embracing mystery, a more fluid foundation emerges to reconstruct a more evolving faith. Deconstruction can become an integrated part of faith and community life in order to provide a space to process worldview shifts. Expanding the language of faith to include liminal space, or in-between-ness, allows for a more robust language, increased self-reflection, and a healthier lens for life. A disorienting community is one that walks with others with the presence and grace needed to face and function within a life that does not go as planned.

## SECTION 01: THE PROBLEM

“I am not spinning, I am not spinning . . .” I repeated over and over to myself as I grasped both the north and east walls from the corner of the bed. I was doing everything possible to override the internal wiring that had gone awry. Everything within me was spinning out of control and I was deeply affected for days. I was useless, just clinging to my unconvincing mantra, “I am not spinning,” while my world was turning upside down.

This was my experience of a few days with vertigo as diagnosed by a doctor. But the problem I wish to unpack here is a kind of vertigo of faith that has been with me for years. It is a disorientation that is affecting many—including some friends and some in the community I pastor.

### *Lack of Space*

The church is often not a space to work through the disorientation that comes when one’s understanding of life conflicts with one’s actual experience of life. Instead, the church is more apt to offer clichéd responses and over-simplified resolutions, and provide no real forum for doubt and questions. Many feel a sense of faith-up-in-the-air and are unable to anchor down into the faith that was once familiar. That sense of in-between-ness comes when the faith that once defined life no longer provides vocabulary for what is being experienced in actually living. When one undergoes a clash between what was understood and what is experienced, everything seems to fall apart. The problem is not that this is happening to people. I see this as a regular part of life within faith. The problem comes when church communities do not offer space to engage such crisis of belief safely—unwilling to delve collectively into the tensions, struggle, and

doubt with others. It is because of this problem that we are seeing some choose to try to ignore the disorientation that haunts their every step or to deal with this in isolation, without a willing church to walk alongside them.

*Leaving for a New Land*

“I just cannot believe anymore.”

The words hung in the air, heavy and dense. The bright and energetic atmosphere of the bustling coffee roaster did not match the heaviness at our corner of the table. I focused in on her eyes. No tears came; she was long past tears.

“I guess I realized I can’t ignore what has happened in my life. It changed the way I see everything.”

Of course it has. You cannot go through a tragedy and not see the world with new eyes. Questions and doubts. Struggles and tensions. Uncertainty and darkness. This had been her upside down world—and how could her life not be disorienting?

“I just got tired of explaining why I didn’t see things the way everyone else did. I got tired of defending myself. I was weary of proving I still belonged.”

I couldn’t quickly respond. I didn’t want to defend the church. I knew she was drawing from a deep well of hurt and abandonment by the church. Years had gone by, and she’d made a life of meaning outside her once-vibrant faith. It was not hard to understand why. She had gone through so much. And they had all left. Her church used her doubt and struggle against her. She had been alienated from long-time friends—and it was “matters of faith” by which they claimed their righteous abandonment.

“So, I just gave it all up,” she said with a freeing sense of matter-of-fact-ness.

I mourned the loss within her. I mourned the loss, with her. We sat in silence, I knew that words had been all my friend had heard. Words to accuse. Words to condemn. Words to pressure. Words to fix. Words to formulate answers. I had none of these words for her.

We sat together in the space that was once a dense, disorienting fog. Her eyes had adjusted to the fuzziness now. I noticed her tone move from mourning to confidence. “I have moved on. I have left that god behind.”<sup>2</sup>

*Out of the Coma and Into the Flood*

... there is no way to “return to the faith of your childhood,” not really, not unless you’ve just woken from a decades-long and absolutely literal coma . . . whatever faith you emerge with at the end of your life is going to be not simply affected by that life but intimately dependent upon it, for faith in God is, in the deepest sense, faith in life—which means that even the staunchest life of faith is a life of great change. It follows that if you believe at fifty what you believed at fifteen, then you have not lived—or have denied the reality of your life.

- Christian Wiman, *My Bright Abyss*

As Wiman notes, a faith that has not changed would be more likely attributed to one living in a long coma, rather than a living a well-lived life. Shifts in our life—shifts in our faith—are a regular part of life. Changes of scenery in our life *do* affect our faith within. Tragedies affect us. Triumphs change us. Relationships shape us.

Wiman is saying our faith changes over time. Our experience of life actually shapes our faith—or maybe we could say the unfolding of life changes us, and our faith can either continue to respond to the new contours in our life, or it will feel like it no longer fits. And I realize this may threaten many people who are less comfortable with

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<sup>2</sup> While this is not an actual conversation I had, it is a mashup of the many conversations I have had similar to this one over the years pastoring Convergence.

the idea of faith changing with our life. Metaphors such as rock or anchor are equated to a life with God. He is our Rock. He is our anchor in the storm. These are fine metaphors; they have their place and their value. But, like Kathy Escobar, I have struggled with the value of such metaphors. She writes, “When you come from a faith that is built on standing firm on certain specific beliefs, it’s incredibly hard to feel secure when your foundation turns to sand.”<sup>3</sup>

The honesty with which Kathy writes in her book, *Faith Shift*, resonates at many points with my own story. In an interview with her, we talked about both of our experiences struggling with the metaphors of solidification. In fact, I shared with her my view that the single most unhelpful metaphor for God is the “Rock,” or solid ground. I think the sand—from the parable—looks a lot more like what I experience with God. Metaphors of rivers and seas speak a lot more to me and our community. She responded by saying, “I know so little anymore. It was so much easier when you had a Truth to stand on.” Again, it was so good to find another person who did not think I was blasphemous or unfaithful to God by questioning what once was such a “firm foundation.”

Escobar writes about a faith that unravels, “[This] unraveling involves loss. It’s not a place where we rebuild or find what works or try to make peace with the past—that comes later. It’s where we experience and respect the realities of losing beliefs, practices, relationships, structures, identity, and purpose.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Kathy Escobar *Faith Shift: Finding Your Way Forward When Everything You Believe Is Coming Apart*. (Carol Stream, IL: Convergent, 2014), Kindle loc. 365.

<sup>4</sup> Kathy Escobar, *Faith Shift: Finding Your Way Forward When Everything You Believe Is Coming Apart* (Carol Stream, IL: Convergent, 2014), Kindle loc. 1147.

Fluidity, shifting, change—these can all be very unsettling words, disorienting, even. To disorient is “to lose one’s bearing” or “to lose one’s sense of time, place, or identity.”<sup>5</sup> This seems to be a good term for what most people go through in some seasons of their life. Every minute someone loses a loved one. Every minute someone experiences the miracle of birth. For those losing from death and those gaining from birth—life will never be the same. The friends and families connected to these births and deaths feel it deeply. Whether they are the mourners or the celebrators, their “world” is in flux. Vantage points are moved when life changes, leading us to see the world differently. Death and birth trigger shifts that expand our view of life, and yet, many other experiences in life provide these movements as well. Promotions and layoffs shift our viewpoint. Divorce, break-ups, weddings, and first dates can yield a shift. Bankruptcies and windfalls, loneliness and solitude, prayers answered and prayers (seemingly) unheard, all cause change in us and our view of the world.

At some point, an individual realizes that life is complex and it cannot be controlled. There have also been cultural moods or periods where control was the goal. In the modern era, from the Enlightenment on, there existed an undercurrent attitude that one is a master of one’s own fate. Modernity viewed the world as something to be managed, controlled, and mastered. Such lust for control was not limited to the modern era; one can see its evidence long before that. Scripture tells the story of Solomon who “displayed modernist instincts to control, form, shape, and manage the world.”<sup>6</sup> Yet

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<sup>5</sup> “Disorient,” Merriam-Webster.com, accessed December 15, 2013, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/disorient>.

<sup>6</sup> Peter J. Leithart, *Solomon among the Postmoderns* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2008), 125-126.

Solomon, in all his wisdom, comes to see what Leithart describes: “[Solomon] wants us to know that we were never in control to begin with. All of it—every last bit of it—was shepherding the wind.”<sup>7</sup> Until life proves to be utterly unmanageable, we may strive like Solomon, to manage our worlds.

This reality of our lack of control is the disorientation the church is often not ready to provide space to process. Life shapes our outlook. Our outlook is also shaped by our faith. The two, our experience and our faith, are at times in sync, but at other times in tension. Wiman paints a picture of our faith growing along with our experience of life. We can be assured that our faith, if we live this life deeply, will not remain the same.

### *Questions to Wrestle With*

Setting out to write this dissertation was not primarily about solving something. The research, the reflection, the writing, and the observations have in many ways all come out of encountering conversations that looked a lot like the dialogue that began this introduction.

“Nones”<sup>8</sup> and “dones” have fully emerged as buzzwords and labels for those leaving the church today. However, before these categories had become popular, it was apparent in the church planting process; even in a Bible-Belt city such as Oklahoma City, the conversations and struggles regarding faith were real and obvious. The fluidity of life was crashing against the concreteness of faith.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>8</sup> James White, *The Rise of the Nones: Understanding and Reaching the Religiously Unaffiliated* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2014), Kindle.

The language and practice of the faith many have been exposed to is obsessed with certainty, fearful of doubt, and unavailable for dialogue. More answers, more faith, and fewer questions are the experience of many within the church. I have come in contact with so many who have felt guilt, fear, and anger regarding their own struggling faith. All of this can be quite disorienting.

In the past ten-plus years of starting and leading Convergence Community, our group has heard time and time again that our community is a person's last stop before potentially leaving the church. Convergence has been the last hope for some on the way out of the church and, in some instances, out of the Christian faith altogether.

The response to being this last stop for people has resulted in wrestling with the questions of the role of community. How can a community of faith make space for actually losing a version of faith? How can a community of faith recognize those who are going through disorientation in life and faith? How can a community of faith not be threatened by doubts, questions, and struggles? How can a Christian community aid in growing hope, increasing love, and forging a deeper bond within community, all while increasing a fidelity to Christ?



## SECTION 02: OTHER SOLUTIONS

“I will never move back to Oklahoma,” I naively pronounced to my wife when we moved west to Reno early in our marriage. It was less about Oklahoma and more about the wonderful discovery of a world beyond my small and narrow view of life.

Ten years later we found ourselves moving back. We had lived in several places and loved each one of them. But as we began to think about putting down roots, we could not help but consider our home state. Upon visiting, we found a spiritual need that resonated with us. We were drawn to the heart of Oklahoma City, where a renaissance of sorts was emerging. Artists, foodies, and community builders were moving back and starting to dream of what the city could look like. We found ourselves in some of these conversations, realizing that many in these groups no longer found a home within the churches of their youth. They were being alienated by the narrowed views that perpetuated the church in Oklahoma.

We longed to make a space where people could return, stay, and discover the hospitality of Christ. We dreamed of building a community that welcomed creatives, strugglers, and doubters. We saw clearly that two “solutions” were dominating the landscape of church for those who struggled with their faith. The first was an option to fortify faith with certainty and definability, taking on a more fundamentalist tone. The other option, which we would discover more closely in the coming years, was to leave the church and the faith altogether. We believed there must be a third way, a way to grow in fidelity to Christ and welcome those who felt the pressure of the two primary options. We wanted to say, “It’s okay; let’s wrestle with the tensions within faith together,” to a population that was being alienated from faith or pressured to become increasingly

fundamentalist about faith. But before we delve into our third option, we must take a closer look at the two options we found dominating the landscape of Christianity in our city.

### **The Fundamentalization of Faith**

Life is fluid, yet faith is often viewed as stable, concrete, and solid. In this contrast resides a problem. Life experience leads to change. Faith, for many, has not been able to evolve through these changing life experiences. Going through disorienting experiences in life, feeling caught in-between seasons of life, and facing more questions than certainty, more doubt and absence of God than assurances, are all challenges to faith. One is likely to react in one of two ways (this is, admittedly, an oversimplification of the variety of our human responses). Some may have a sense of despair that leads to leaving the faith. Today, we see atheism is on the rise.<sup>9</sup> There are many reasons for this, both complex and simple. But I can see that, in my own experience as a pastor, the disorienting of a faith falling apart is one that leads people to leave the church.

While struggles, questions, and disorientation can lead to a crumbling of faith altogether, it can also lead to a fundamentalizing of faith.

We would rather be ruined than changed.  
We would rather die in our dread  
Than climb the cross of the present  
And let our illusions die.

- W.H. Auden, *The Age of Anxiety*

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<sup>9</sup> Kimberly Winston, "Atheism Rises, Religiosity Declines in America," *Huffington Post*, August 15, 2012, accessed December 13, 2013, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/08/14/atheism-rise-religiosity-decline-in-america\\_n\\_1777031.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/08/14/atheism-rise-religiosity-decline-in-america_n_1777031.html).

Auden's words remind us that we are willing to cling to something that no longer works just for the sake of avoiding change. It is with this same kind of resistance to an evolution of faith that one staunchly clings to what is already comfortable to believe. In other words, when faced with disorientation, one may force faith to become certainty. When one feels insecure, uncertain, anxious within faith, one will do whatever is needed to overcome such emotions and situations. The fix comes in the form of control, certainty, and confidence—an attempt to leave no more room for questions and doubts. Neo-Fundamentalism comes to the rescue.

### *Neo-Fundamentalism*

Neo-fundamentalists thus respond to the challenges of a postmodern culture by narrowing the boundaries of what they consider genuinely evangelical and orthodox Christianity, and rejecting those who maintain a more open stance.<sup>10</sup>

In uncertain and disorienting times, whether for an individual or a culture, some will gravitate to environments where the resulting anxiety can be reduced through control and structure. It is not a surprise, then, that a movement that adopts high control and clear boundaries might thrive in creating community for those undergoing disorientation in their faith. The Neo-Fundamentalists are a subset of Evangelicalism that, like its fundamentalist predecessors, fight for scriptural inerrancy; in addition, they commonly focus on the nature of truth and Calvinistic soteriology.<sup>11</sup> Scot McKnight writes in his

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<sup>10</sup> Michael Clawson, "Young, Restless, and Fundamentalist: Neo-Fundamentalism among American Evangelicals," Patheos, January 19, 2012, accessed September 25, 2015, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2012/01/neo-fundamentalism-excellent-but-somewhat-lengthy-essay/>

<sup>11</sup> Michael Clawson, "Young, Restless, and Fundamentalist: Neo-Fundamentalism among American Evangelicals," Patheos, January 19, 2012, accessed September 25, 2015,

blog post “The Rise of Neo-Fundamentalism” that they are driven by a remnant mentality, a conviction that they are protecting the true faith. This “faithful remnant” includes the belief that “it alone remains true to the fullness of the gospel and the orthodox faith,” and “that the solution to this nearly apocalyptic church situation is to tighten up theological stands and clarify what is most central and most important for the Church today.”<sup>12</sup>

### *Truth Reduced to Text*

In my years planting and pastoring Convergence,<sup>13</sup> I have heard numerous stories and personally experienced an increasing tension in faith. For many, what was once very black and white has become colored with tones of gray. For the Neo-Fundamentalist, the solution for those who are struggling with the grayscale within matters of faith is to simply recalibrate the contrast in order to return to a black and white picture. Truth is not hard to digest, it is not muddy or fuzzy at times, it is clear and concise, they would say.

Truth is simply true. In *He is Not Silent*, Albert Mohler quotes John MacArthur:

I believe the goal of preaching is to compel people to make a decision. I want people who listen to me to understand exactly what God’s Word demands of them when I am through. Then they must say either, “Yes, I will do what God says,” or “No, I won’t do what God says.”<sup>14</sup>

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<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2012/01/neo-fundamentalism-excellent-but-somewhat-lengthy-essay/>

<sup>12</sup> Scot McKnight, “The Rise of Neo-Fundamentalism,” Jesus Creed blog, August 25, 2006, accessed September 15, 2015, <http://www.patheos.com/community/jesuscreed/2006/08/25/the-rise-of-neo-fundamentalism/>

<sup>13</sup> Convergence Community in Oklahoma City is the church my family planted over ten years ago. Convergence is the inspiration for this dissertation. So many amazing people have shared life together to make our small community a significant space to deconstruct faith. I am so very thankful that I get to continue to pastor and lead this group.

<sup>14</sup> Albert Mohler, *He Is Not Silent: Preaching in a Postmodern World* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2008), 69.

Either yes or no. The neo-fundamentalist leaves no room for the kind of tension and struggle I am proposing that the church must make room for. No dialogue. No conversation. No questions. Simply preach and respond. This is an extreme oversimplification of the journey of faith. And yet the efficiency, the authority, and the simplicity of a listen and respond, take it or leave it kind of approach can be a great comfort for many who have been overwhelmed by too many questions, too many struggles, and too many contradictions. It is easier to live in a black and white, either/or, simplified world.

Martoia quotes Thomas Aquinas, “*prius vita quam doctrina*, or, life is prior to doctrines.” in an effort to remind the Church that it’s days tied to doctrine obsessed and textual forms is not preeminent expression of Christ following. He goes on to write,

Prior to Gutenberg, a full 3/4 of Christian history, how did the church do formation? Those of us that have our own copy of a text are on the minority side of history . . . We need a post Gutenberg church; a church that will move from text to hypertext combined with image. We need a church that lives the liminality between a dead modern world and a fully floundering postmodern world that needs a re-imagining leading to deeper integration. We need a church more interested in transformation than information transmission. We need a church aware of her textual addiction and bibliolatry.<sup>15</sup>

Neo-Fundamentalism offers a grave critique of a more postmodern perspective. Again, through a black and white lens, their critique of a postmodernism-influenced ministry is based in fear. A more fundamentalist consideration of the influence of postmodernism promotes a fear that in a postmodern world, no truth will exist and complete anarchy will be sought.

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<sup>15</sup> Ron Martoia, “A Craving for Quiet Contemplation,” Ron Martoia, March 30, 2013 accessed December 30, 2015, <http://ronmartoia.com/interest-in-contemplation-a-craving-the-w/>

The “death of the text” is evident in the resistance to biblical preaching in many churches. Postmodern ears no longer want to hear the “thus saith the Lord” of the biblical text. Since truth is made, and not found, we can design our own personal religion or spirituality—and leave out inconvenient doctrines and moral commands. Postmodernism promises that the individual can construct a personal structure of spirituality, free from outside interference or permission. Under the motto, “There’s no truth like my truth,” postmodernism’s children will establish their own doctrinal system, and will defy correction.<sup>16</sup>

And yet, this is not the only way to make room for a postmodernism-influenced faith. As one goes through a disorientation of faith, fear of where that person might end up must not inhibit exploration. What if postmodernism does not have to be taken to the nth degree? What if a postmodern voice can be measured and considered? Behind a more postmodernism-influenced faith is not necessarily the desire to rule one’s own life with no correction or outside wisdom. However, it is a willingness to question authority and acknowledge that power can often form, influence, and perpetuate what one believes to be “truth.” Danaher writes:

Many people of faith perceive the emergent, postmodern world as a threat to their faith. They incorrectly assume that in a postmodern world there are no absolute truths, which they take to mean that there is no God. There are, however, many postmodern Christians who claim that we should employ a postmodern skepticism or suspicion, not about the existence of an absolute truth (such as God), but about our access to that truth.<sup>17</sup>

When one awakens to tensions in faith, fundamentalism tends to, out of fear, be threatened by questions, be combative about authority, and oversimplify and demonize contrarians. A more measured understanding of a postmodernism-influenced faith, a faith

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<sup>16</sup> Albert Mohler, “Ministry is Stranger Than It Used to Be: The Challenge of Postmodernism,” Albert Mohler, July 16, 2009, accessed September 15, 2015, <http://www.albertmohler.com/2009/07/16/ministry-is-stranger-than-it-used-to-be-the-challenge-of-postmodernism-2/>

<sup>17</sup> James P. Danaher, *Eyes that See, Ears that Hear: Perceiving Jesus in a Postmodern Context* (Liguori, MO: Liguori/Triumph, 2006), Kindle, 336.

that makes room for disorientation and tension, is needed. Danaher writes of the value a postmodern mindset brings to Christianity and its expanding understanding of truth:

Postmodern Christians do not maintain that they have no access to the truth, but merely that they do not have the kind of access to the truth that modernity had set forth as its model . . . Modern, Enlightenment science equated knowledge with demonstrable certainty. Today, science concedes “that knowledge as a human endeavor, though never certain, can be overwhelmingly probable.”<sup>18</sup>

### *Leadership Obsessed*

Not only is truth narrowed in Neo-Fundamentalism, but authority is as well. The leader is not only male, but often encouraged to be hyper-masculine. Clawson writes of the Neo-Fundamentalists, “Besides a rejection of postmodernity, an embrace of Calvinism, and a continuation of the culture wars, a final key characteristic of neo-fundamentalism is a strong emphasis on traditional gender roles in an attempt to reclaim a more ‘masculine’ version of the faith.”<sup>19</sup> Strong authoritative leadership has often been the proposed solution for those who struggle in faith. The idea finds an overinflated view of authority and a limiting, if not degrading, view of the every-person. It is a reaction against the forceful pushback postmodernism brings upon ideas of authority. Mohler adds:

According to the postmodernists, those in authority use their power to remain in power, and to serve their own interests. Their laws, traditions, texts, and “truth” are nothing more than that which is designed to maintain them in power.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Michael Clawson, “Young, Restless, and Fundamentalist: Neo-fundamentalism among American Evangelicals,” Patheos, January 19, 2012, accessed September 25, 2015, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2012/01/neo-fundamentalism-excellent-but-somewhat-lengthy-essay/>

<sup>20</sup> Albert Mohler, “Ministry is Stranger Than it Used to Be: The Challenge of Postmodernism,” AlbertMohler.com, July 15, 2004, accessed September 25, 2015,

Admittedly, I count myself among those who have been influenced by a postmodern skepticism of authority. It is not that authority should not exist, or that following authority is discouraged. However, it does mean that authority cannot merely be assumed or taken without consideration, discernment, or even questions.

There is a leadership that is far more uncomfortable than increased control and hyper-masculinity. And yet, it seems to be the kind of leadership that one is encouraged to consider as one follows Christ. It is the leadership of the Holy Spirit. Nicholas King writes about authority, but an authority of the Spirit.

So the source of any authority in the Church is and can only be the Spirit. The Spirit can never be forced or taken for granted, and therefore the authority it conveys must never be abused. That Spirit will guide us always on the journey, but those who aspire to leadership in the Church have to follow the Spirit's leading, not dictate where it goes, or what is to be taught.<sup>21</sup>

King was a part of our required reading during my doctorate work. I remember wrestling with these words with our forum. I wrote of being perplexed and challenged to live by the Spirit.

I'm perplexed. Endlessly perplexed. It feels so risky to rely on the Spirit. Not risky to rely on the Spirit necessarily—but the Spirit is invisible and comes through the form of humanity. And to me, that is RISKY!

I love the reminder—challenge—tension—RISK of needing to be reliant on the Spirit. Not really a reminder I guess—but a challenge to reassess—How much am I dependent on the Spirit? How much am I doing that I easily rely on my own skill set, my understanding, my power?

But, here is the tension—the rub—the distrust that resides in me, King writes about this power, “but this power is not exercised in the way that we human beings naturally adopt . . . but those who aspire to leadership in the Church have to follow the Spirit's leading, not dictate where it

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<http://www.albertmohler.com/2004/07/15/ministry-is-stranger-than-it-used-to-be-the-challenge-of-postmodernism/>

<sup>21</sup> Nicholas King, *The Helplessness of God: Biblical Models of Leadership* (Suffolk, UK: KM Publishing, 2014), 165.



goes . . .” I don't trust leaders (or people) to NOT manipulate the situation. I hear prayers prayed that are agenda-ed and controlling. I see practices and influences that are agenda-ed. I am aware of slants that always seem to be “what the Lord is speaking.”

All of these things lead to me being highly suspect. The stronger someone pushes for “God's way” the more I begin to wonder what that person personally has at stake. I don't like displays of arrogance, over-confidence, grand-standing, or absolute authority. I am not drawn to it—nor am I one to associate such things with God. I want to see the tension and hear the struggle of those who share what they think where God is leading. I want people to admit that they may be hearing it wrong or may be frail in their assessment. This kind of leadership is not less appealing, it's more appealing—it is the authenticity I feel like that needs to be a result of the human element in the invisible power of the Spirit. . .<sup>22</sup>

My struggle with leaders and authority is real. Even as I personally live out a leadership role in our community, I still struggle with such things. I hope I never resolve this or get comfortable with it. Neo-Fundamentalism, as I have seen it exercised, pushes to be authoritative, without such tension, without such authenticity.

### *Let the Disorienting Begin*

The process of deconstruction is sparked by life experiences: the liminal space (in-betweenness) of uncertainty, uncontrollability, and mystery. Deconstruction can also be scheduled in a way, by observing seasons like Lent or intentionally engaging in processes of reflection and consideration of the deeper themes of life. However, deconstruction really only happens when one is, first, willing to admit that life is viewed through a lens and that lens is limited and skewed.

Deconstruction is a process of finding one's current lens for viewing the world (self, others, God, career, etc.) to be too limited to continue to be useful. “As soon as

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<sup>22</sup> Scrivner, Scott. forum post, June 20, 2015 (9:04 a.m. CST), on “my perplex-ed-ness, a confession (of course), and one last THANK YOU” <https://foxtale.georgefox.edu/moodle/mod/forum/discuss.php?d=159237>.

there is a lens, there is distortion,”<sup>23</sup> James K.A. Smith writes of Rousseau’s view on language. “We can buff this lens for days or grind it as thin as possible, but this lens is mediation, and as soon as there is mediation, there is distortion.”<sup>24</sup> Rousseau is working through his take on linguistics, but it fits here with one’s view of the world. However, Rousseau believed that there was a way to shed language and return to a place where one experiences the world as it truly is. In *The Cost of Certainty*, Jeremy Young writes,

What I propose is that we make room for uncertainty and return to the ancient theological insights that informs the Christian religion that it cannot contain or adequately express the mystery of God. They give form to our apprehensions of God and enable us to relate to him through them, but they become obstacles to knowledge of God if we take them to be accurate and guaranteed representations of divine truth. In essence, knowledge of God is experiential not conceptual.<sup>25</sup>

It is quite disorienting in today’s Christian climate to recognize that the ancient roots of our faith hold loosely to the idea that we can grasp and contain God. Today, many of us are confronted with a version of Christianity that is certain and solid, objective and concrete. And yet does this version of faith make room at all for mystery, for uncertainty, for the limitations of the lenses we skew life through? The postmodern question, “Can one experience the world as it truly is?” is a crucial one in us rediscovering that our Christian roots go farther than the modern era’s reduction. Derrida, the father of Deconstruction Philosophy, is most famous for his words, “there is nothing

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<sup>23</sup> James K.A. Smith, *Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism? Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 36.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Jeremy Young, *The Cost of Certainty: How Religious Conviction Betrays the Human Psyche* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 2005), 148.

outside the text.”<sup>26</sup> This does not mean that there is nothing without literal “text” but that there is nothing that is not interpreted by us. More clearly said, we interpret everything we see, experience, hear, and read. Smith explains Derrida’s view that Rousseau is naïve to think we can ever see the world as it truly is: “We are never able to step out of our skins. Texts and language are not something that we get through to a world without language or a state of nature where interpretation is not necessary.”<sup>27</sup>

Deconstruction happens when we admit that our vantage point is just that, a vantage point among others. While it can be disorienting to consider that ours is not the only story being told, it is a part of growth and development that is vital. Compassion and grace can abound when we acknowledge our limited lens. Listening and learning can flourish when we realize our perspective is flawed. Humility and growth emerge as we seek God for Truth (knowing we will not always get it right) and others as fellow storied lives.

The arts provide an atmosphere where we can observe shifts in vantage points. While art can provide warmth and beauty, it can also disorient and remind us that one can view the same world very differently from another. When viewing or experiencing art, the observer enters the vantage point of the artist or the subject of the artist. Sometimes this process results in a feeling of identification or a sense of finally someone understanding how we feel. We hear a lyric or read a poem or process a paragraph from a writer and finally feel understood; they say eloquently what we have never been quite

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<sup>26</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 158.

<sup>27</sup> James K.A. Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism? Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 38.

able to express. This is the commonness of art. But art can play a subversive role, too, presenting a new lens, the artist's views or the subject's views, to the observer. Viewing through another lens can be disorienting (to lose one's sense of time, place, or identity). When we open the possibility that other perspectives exist, it expands our limited world—and that can be a vertigo-like experience.

However, to be open to such expansion, the underlying assumptions of my-view, my-way, my-understanding must be let go of, or even unlocked from our deeply held perspectives. Bob Ekblad observes:

The Bible is locked up by theologies we absorb from our subcultures, whether we grow up in the church or not. Hidden or consciously embraced theological assumptions and other presuppositions influence our interpretation, causing us to automatically interpret along traditional lines. Left unchallenged, these assumptions will cause us to consciously or unconsciously look for evidence in the Bible to support our ideas.<sup>28</sup>

In other words, everyone comes to the Scriptures with biases and vantage points. No one is immune to bias or tradition. And yet, the concern is whenever these vantage points are considered flawless and absolute. Without humility about one's bias, without a willingness to acknowledge other viewpoints, chances for growth and learning are almost always blocked.

### *A Solution Worth Resisting*

The problem that lies at the heart of this writer's motivation is: when life crashes against what we have always held as true or expected, the Christian circles we have most likely been part of are rarely able to deal with our questions and doubts. The

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<sup>28</sup> Bob Ekblad, *Reading the Bible with the Damned* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), Kindle, 285.

relationships that were once built on our agreement on faith are now strained if not broken by our seeming unfaithfulness. Angst, isolation, and depression can all emerge from the clash of experience and faith. I have experienced this. And I know many who have trekked through these scenarios eventually to quiet those tensions outwardly, or leave the faith altogether, or at least have deep scars from the process. We have been building a community that embraces the experiences of people as a part of the faith walk, not isolated from it. Questions. They are welcomed and often remain unanswered. Doubts. They are acknowledged, and often go unresolved. Tensions. They are shared, and found to be a regular part of faith and life.

Again, in light of the trend of Neo-Fundamentalism, we are building a third way of moving forward within the disorientation of faith. However, we must look more closely at the growing number of leavers of the faith, who present another solution to the problem.

## **Leaving**

### *The Abandonment of Faith*

It has been within the last decade that I have come to encounter and know a growing number of people leaving the Church and even the Christian faith. It is a common story in my experience, but also, maybe even more so, throughout our country. While fundamentalizing faith is one solution to the tensions and disorientation that often accompany faith, leaving is a solution on the opposite end of the spectrum. Rather than replacing uncertainty and doubt with the answers fundamentalism gives, leaving it altogether provides freedom from a faith that no longer works. There are many angles, stories, and reasons for leaving. Today, I find myself more closely understanding and

empathetic to those leaving than those who ramp up their certainty through fundamentalism. I feel like it is a world I have gravitated more toward since pastoring Convergence. It is the stories I have come to know—not the statistics or polls—that capture my attention.

### *Rejection Stories*

Oh let it begin; Let it begin; Let it begin

Oh darling; You are the son of an evil man; I know you hate yourself  
But you're nothing like him; And it's over now; You can pick yourself off  
the ground; Cause you're cool now; And you're nothing like him

I've seen the world; And there's no heaven and there's no hell; I've seen  
the world; And there's no heaven and there's no hell  
And I believe; That when we die, we die;  
So let me love you tonight.

- Jonathan Pierce, *The Book of Revelation*<sup>29</sup>

The simple pop melody and the catchy hook implanted themselves and I was singing along in no time. I had discovered a new band, well, new to me, and I was loving their obsession with the Smiths and their Brit-pop sensibility. And yet, it was really the first track on their album *Portamento* that sunk deep, causing a great deal of reflection throughout my day as I played it over and over again.

I have friends that could have written these lyrics. In fact, I have had conversations that sound similar to the back story for this song. The Drums' lead singer, Jonny Pierce, tells of his "extreme Pentecostal" background. Both of his parents were pastors in the church. He says he wrote this song to a "Christian Nation" where his blunt

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<sup>29</sup> The Drums, "Book of Revelation," released September 2, 2011, New York, Moshi Moshi/Island Records, Spotify.

proclamation of his atheism might ring “taboo.” Pierce describes the first track on the album, “The Book of Revelation,” as a song about his lifelong conflict and running from Christian ideology.<sup>30</sup>

Surely, such running from his Christian roots is tied closely to Pierce's experience of rejection from family and church. He talks about the condemnation he continues to receive for being gay:

But there's this whole other world that I come from, where you are condemned to hell and there's nothing you can do about it if you're a homosexual. I've had my mother tell me that she would prefer me to live my life as a single man, celibate, than to have a gay partner. And I just say, “Mom, that's so easy for you to say, because you were born straight. And you liked guys, and started dating one, and you married one! And you just have no idea what it's like.” They are afraid to even begin to put themselves in my shoes, because the second they begin to feel compassion toward what they call my “problem” or my “struggle,” then they're kind of sinning, and enabling. So they really have this ice-cold stance against it.<sup>31</sup>

The song still echoes in my mind as I write, “You are the son of an evil man; I know you hate yourself, but you're nothing like him; And it's over now; You can pick yourself off the ground; Cause you're cool now; And you're nothing like him.” I cannot help but feel deeply the pain the church has caused so many. Too often, church walls are quite cold, quite thick and quite tall, all erected in the name of Christ. However, Christ-following and the Christian Community is not a protected fortress—we need new imagery. Len Sweet sees the table as a welcoming metaphor for the Christ-follower and Christian Community.

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<sup>30</sup> The Drums, “Book of Revelation (commentary),” released September 2, 2011, New York, Moshi Moshi/Island Records, Spotify.

<sup>31</sup> “The Drums’ Jonny Pierce on Marriage Equality and Why He’d Like to See an End to Gay Pride Parades,” *Under the Radar Magazine*, October 26, 2012, accessed December 5, 2014, [http://www.undertheradarmag.com/interviews/the\\_drums\\_jonny\\_pierce/](http://www.undertheradarmag.com/interviews/the_drums_jonny_pierce/).

How many of our churches speak the opposite greeting when strangers enter: “You arrive as an outsider, and we’ll make your path into our community as difficult as possible.” Our churches are not “ours.” The communion table doesn’t “belong” to us. It’s the Lord’s Table; we all are merely guests. To be a good church means we allow Jesus to be the true Head of our Table. We accept our role as guests and not hosts, and we welcome whatever other guests our Lord invites to table with us.<sup>32</sup>

We need change. Instead of protectors, we are guests. Instead of exclusive private dinners of people like us, we enjoy an open table of diversity with the most gracious Host of all, Jesus.

### *Violent Stories*

My playlist moves on to the latest album by U2. The haunting narrative seeps through the speakers with the tone of tragic storytelling. A Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) triple car bomb goes off in Dublin, the country’s deadliest attack to date, in 1974, and a best friend of Bono’s sees it all, while losing his father.

Boy sees his father  
Crushed under the weight  
Of a cross in a passion  
Where the passion is hate  
Blue mink Ford  
I’m gonna detonate in your den

Blood in the house  
Blood on the street  
The worst things in the world  
Are justified by belief  
Registration 1385-WZ

And then Bono reveals the haunting confession . . .

I don’t believe anymore

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<sup>32</sup> Leonard Sweet, *Tablet to Table: Where Community is Found and Identity is Formed* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2015), 97-98.



I don't believe anymore<sup>33</sup>

“I don’t believe anymore,” the echo that Bono rings out, is not his own unbelief but that of his friend. Again, as in the song by The Drums, there are legitimate reasons for unbelief. The violence of the UVF is congruent with the longstanding Protestant-Catholic feud in Ireland. So many atrocities have been committed in the name of religion. I think people are assessing historical and present-day religious violence and misconduct and are motivated to leave their faith now more than ever.<sup>34</sup> In the case of Johnny Pierce, the rejection of who he sees himself to be has led him to leave the faith. In the case of the car bombing, it is religious violence.

Rejection and violence are just a few of what I have come to see as legitimate reasons for lack of belief. What I mean by this is more pastoral and experiential than theological or intellectual reasons for atheism. When I hear and see the pain people have gone through within some settings of the church, I sympathize with their letting go of faith. I comprehend their reasons for walking away from the Church. And, in these cases, I sing along, “I don’t believe anymore,” with full authenticity...because I have grown not to believe in such a faith either.

*If I Am Honest*

God of watching,  
whose gaze I doubt  
and rally against both,  
but in which I nonetheless take refuge,  
despite my limited vision.

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<sup>33</sup> U2, “Raised By Wolves,” recorded 2009-2014, Island/Interscope Records, iTunes.

<sup>34</sup> Kester Brewin, *After Magic – Moves Beyond Super-Nature, From Batman to Shakespeare* (Self Published 2013), Kindle, 86.

Shelter me today,  
 against the flitting nature of my own focus  
 and bring me to the calm place in which to stand.  
 And when I falter, which is likely,  
 give me both the courage and the kindness to begin again with hope and coping.  
 For you are the one whose watchfulness is steady.  
 Amen.

—Pádraig ÓTauma<sup>35</sup>

The tension I often feel and sense in others can be captured in the prayer above. I doubt and cling to a faith that has enriched and forever transformed me, but in its perverted states has rendered guilt, struggle, exclusivity, and pain. If I am honest, I can understand why some leave the church and even their Christian faith. I am not giving up on my faith, but some of my friends have.

Forty years is enough to see life and death. Forty years is enough to see love and loss. Forty years is enough life to descend into dark places and climb to bright mountaintops. Life doles out struggle and heartache along with joy and smooth sailing. I know this from experience. I remember my first funeral as a kid and as a pastor. I remember my wedding and my first wedding as a pastor. I remember hearing of the divorce of a couple I married, and seeing the divorce of my brother. I remember meeting my babies for the first time, and the tears of friends who have struggled to become parents. I remember my best friend losing his mother in an accident, then his wife to cancer. I remember being awoken to the horror of the call I received announcing the suicide of my father-in-law and the shaking voice on the phone in the middle of the night from a friend, who was with their father who would soon be arrested.

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<sup>35</sup> Pádraig ÓTauma, “Opening Collect,” recorded February 2010, Tre Sheppard Studios, iTunes.

Because of all of these things and many others, I am immersing myself into the research and reflection of the value of deconstruction within the context of Christian faith and Christian community. When our faith and community life perpetuates and prolongs the tensions we already undergo in the act of living, I see the need for change. Change happens through letting go, through reshaping. And yet reshaping means what exists must be deconstructed. Deconstruction is not about destroying, but renewing. Jacques Derrida suggests, “but these programs [of deconstruction] must always be open-ended, porous, experimental, nonprogrammable, vigilant, self-questioning, self-revising, exposed to their other, inventive of the other.”<sup>36</sup> Deconstruction opens new possibilities in light of broken and limited ways. It is not that limitlessness will be achieved, but new life among the old. Deconstruction is not a once and for all solution, but a cycle in which we can engage in deconstructing, reshaping, and resigning. Tim Keel writes about a faith that undergoes “semper reformata,”<sup>37</sup> or an ongoing reformation, rather than a historical-one-time-event of Reformation.

The path I am on with deconstruction is both personal—so I can continue to have hope and faith—and also communal—so others might find hope and faith. The work we are doing in Oklahoma City, as Convergence Community, is very much an exercise in what deconstructionism can do. We see it as reforming faith and making space for people to work through their own disorientation.

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<sup>36</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*, edited with a commentary by John D. Caputo (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), 70.

<sup>37</sup> Tim Keel, *Intuitive Leadership: Embracing a Paradigm of Narrative, Metaphor, and Chaos* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 159.

## Post-

### *A Look at Our World and Beyond*

As I said, it is the stories that compel me, not the statistics: the stories of rejection, of violence, and of a myriad of other reasons that fuel people to leave. To claim to understand fully all the reasons and nuances of why people leave the church and leave the Christian faith would be both arrogant and absurd. I have found that as soon as books, or blog posts, or even tweets hit the market claiming why people are leaving, if they are not up front about their limited view, they are going to miss a group of people who do not want to be oversimplified to a statistic. And even more unhelpful to the topic are the books who claim to have the solution to bringing back those who are leaving en mass. My goals in this writing do not include claiming to account fully for all the reasons people are leaving or providing some solution for their return. But we must view the “solution” of leaving the Church and the Christian faith in the context of our broader culture. The culture of post-. Dave Tomlinson says, “I believe the lack of ready alternatives is a major source of people giving up the quest altogether, and consequently becoming ex-Christians rather than post-evangelicals.”<sup>38</sup>

Over the last ten years of our community, we have provided a “ready alternative” for some. I have received countless calls and emails with a consistent statement: “Convergence is really our last chance for church.” Sometimes the statement is followed by a story of rejection. Other times it is accompanied with a distancing from where the Church has seemed to move. And yet for others, the confession has been laced with an

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<sup>38</sup> Dave Tomlinson, *The Post-Evangelical* (Grand Rapids, MI: Emergent YS/Zondervan), Kindle, 149.

uneasiness—a fear of being misunderstood—but also with the hope of being welcomed into a community that might identify with their all-too-often unwelcome perspective.

We have been the last stop for many on their way out of Christianity and the Church. For some, we have been only a brief stop, and they have moved onward, leaving their faith behind. For others, we have been a healing stop, long enough to get their bearings and to return to a more mainstream expression of Christian faith. And yet for some, we have become home, a space to struggle and express the tension within faith, a place to doubt and let go while also clinging to and renewing faith.

Our existence in the heart of the Bible Belt has seemed out of place at times. Our practice of and language for our Christ-following is not always recognized as such. We are inspired by Crystal Downing's description: "Christians are called to love the whole world, which includes the cultures in which we are embedded. For only by loving culture can we become effective communicators with it."<sup>39</sup> Because we are such a different kind of expression of church, we have struggled with our significance, with our identity, and with our purpose. And yet, we have found our sense of value in the stories and lives that continue to gather, to serve, to sit and eat together. We have found a sense of family in the way we work through our dark nights and bright days. We have found a sense of identity, whether we can label it or not, as what we now know as the Christian faith in an era of postmodernity which has brought with it an environment that is post-Christian, post-evangelical, and post-church.

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<sup>39</sup> Crystal Downing, *Changing Signs of Truth: A Christian Introduction to the Semiotics of Communication* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), Kindle, 209.

### *Post-Christian*

Moby, a musician and DJ, wrote the following on his blog in 2005:

I actually think that the teachings of Christ accommodate most of the new ways in which we perceive ourselves and our world. The problem is that although the teachings of Christ accommodate this, contemporary Christianity does not . . . Christ: acknowledging quantum realities. Christianity: depressingly Newtonian. Does that make any sense? <sup>40</sup>

This is certainly a Post-Christian statement.<sup>41</sup> “Post-Christian” means that we live today in a culture where Christianity is no longer the baseline for cultural identity and discourse.<sup>42</sup> While this may seem negative, it need not bring about despair. In fact, to live in a Post-Christian era can mean a hope that things can be reshaped within our faith.<sup>43</sup> We are so very limited when Christianity is the dominant power, the dominant political and cultural structure of the day. I realize this may sound backwards to the mission of many Christian groups. Ours is not to “baptize” our national structures—but to live as a people following Christ. The evidence of our Post-Christian culture may be found in statistics, which are both overwhelming and insightful.<sup>44</sup> But, it does not take statistics to see that

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<sup>40</sup> “Religion,” Moby Journal Blog, August 12, 2005, accessed December 4, 2014, <http://www.moby.com/journal/2005-08-12/religion.html>.

<sup>41</sup> Brock Morgan, *Youth Ministry in a Post-Christian World: A Hopeful Wake-Up Call* (The Youth Cartel, LLC, 2013), 354, Kindle.

<sup>42</sup> Christian Piatt, *PostChristian: What’s Left? Can We Fix It? Do We Care?* (New York, NY: Jericho Books), 29, Kindle.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Philip Richter and Leslie J. Francis, *Gone But Not Forgotten: Church Leaving and Returning* (London: Redwood Books, 1998), 37.

“No Longer Believing Statistic: Surveying aspects of loss of faith with a battery of 198 statements to identify and describe why there had been a dropping off in their church going.

- I lost my faith 45% under 20, 29% over 20.
- I doubted or question my faith 58% under 20, 42% over 20.
- A questioning faith did not seem acceptable to the church 38% under 20, 30% over 20.
- I became aware of alternative ways of thinking or living 72% under 20, 45% 20 and over.

we can no longer assume that Christianity is the starting place for the majority perspective.

### *Post-Evangelicals*

Whether we see the West as being Post-Christian or not, can we at least see our need to move beyond Evangelicalism? Dave Tomlinson wrote a book ahead of its time and titled it *The Post-Evangelical*. He observes,

[Evangelicalism is] supremely good at introducing people to faith in Christ, but distinctly unhelpful when it comes to the matter of progressing into a more grown up experience of faith . . . There is a high level of expected conformist thinking and behaving — without which one quite quickly feels marginalized.<sup>45</sup>

When I hear the word Evangelical, I cannot help but think of the ideological wars Evangelicals have waged on behalf of “truth” and “morality.” But the post-evangelical can step away from such exclusionary violence because, as Tomlinson identifies, “post-evangelicals object to [a] sense of certainty; they believe in divine truth, but hold that there are virtually no human certainties. The world of God, for instance, cannot escape being mediated by the inherent ambiguities of human language.”<sup>46</sup>

Humility rules in a world where our perspectives are limited and admittedly slanted. In the end, Tomlinson pictures the Post-Evangelical living out a critique of what he sees as the “over-parental, infantilizing nature of Evangelicalism.” Post-evangelicalism takes the beauty from many of our roots in the Christian faith and make

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- I felt God had let me down 10% under 20, 9% 20 and over.
  - So many people fight each other in the name of religion 66% under 20, 64% 20 and over.
  - Many of the church’s teachings were illogical or nonsensical 59% under 20, 34% 20 and over.
  - The church’s teaching were difficult to reconcile with modern science, 61% under 20, 37% 20 and over.”

<sup>45</sup> Tomlinson, *The Post-Evangelical*, Kindle, 57.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

room for growth and maturity, leading to a diverse and creative expression of Christ following in our postmodern world.

*More Posts Than We Can Name*

Our world is changing so rapidly, I think we are unable to recognize and label all the areas and aspects of life that we have moved beyond. My children are growing up in a world different from mine. Of course, this is like any generation in the past few centuries. But now the pace of change is at a speed that has never before been seen. It is a world where the skills they acquire and the skills which they will never require changes constantly. Once-useful skills, Alice Rawsthorn writes in *Hello World*,

often painfully acquired, have become, if not quite obsolete, no longer as valuable as they once were. Who needs a good sense of direction in the age of Google Maps and satellite navigation systems? An ability to spell now we have spellcheck programs? A talent for mental arithmetic when phones have calculator apps? And as for being good at inventing games, useful though that once was, these days there is World of Warcraft or Angry Birds.<sup>47</sup>

Our world is in flux like never before. I am concerned that our take on Christianity misrepresents Christ-following when it paints the picture of faith being a static and stable exercise. Christ enters this flux and flow and calls us to join Him in the waves. We live in a world that is post-Christian, but we will never live in a time that is post-Christ. We may, however, need to let go of some aspects of our faith that no longer usher us, or others, into following Christ.

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<sup>47</sup> Alice Rawsthorn, *Hello World: Where Design Meets Life* (New York: Overlook Press, 2013), Kindle, 3658.



### And The Greatest of These Is Love

... consider that the number of nones in the 1930s and '40s hovered around 5 percent. By 1990 that number had only risen to 8 percent, a mere 3 percent rise in over half a century. Between 1990 and 2008—just eighteen years—the number of nones leaped from 8.1 percent to 15 percent. Then, in just four short years, it climbed to 20 percent, representing one of every five Americans. Even more telling was the discovery in the National Study of Youth and Religion that a third of U.S. adults under the age of thirty don't identify with a religion.

- James Emery White, *The Rise of the Nones*<sup>48</sup>

Leaving the church and the Christian faith is a growing solution to the lack of room many churches provide to work out struggles and tensions within faith. I understand why I have friends who find more grace and acceptance and love outside the Church. I can understand the breath of fresh air some speak of once they have distanced themselves from what they knew as toxicity within their church experience. And yet I cannot yield to this as a viable solution. I still believe that the church can reshape faith, rebuilding with flux and flow in mind. I still see Jesus as the Christ, the One in whom truth, beauty, and meaning are found. Kenda Creasy Dean writes:

The tremors of loveless faith still rumble through American Christianity. The philosopher James K. A. Smith suggests that these rumblings haunt contemporary Christian education in particular: “Could it be the case that learning a Christian perspective doesn’t actually touch my desire . . .” After two and a half centuries of shacking up with “the American dream,” churches have perfected a dicey codependence between consumer-driven therapeutic individualism and religious pragmatism.<sup>49</sup>

Whether it is Christianity “shacking up” with the American Dream or a version of Christianity that is saturated with modernism or whatever might skew our perspective on

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<sup>48</sup> James Emery White, *The Rise of the Nones: Understanding and Reaching the Religiously Unaffiliated* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2014), Kindle, 190.

<sup>49</sup> Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of our Teenagers is Telling the American Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), Kindle, 125.

Christ-following next, we have a faith that needs to be reshaped, reimagined, and reconstructed thoroughly. And this “semper reformada” is not to become more appealing or “relevant”<sup>50</sup> to the masses or to right all the wrongs that have been made in the past, but simply to learn how to do faith, hope, and love, in our current age. Gianni Vattimo observes:

Nietzsche is right: the faithful have killed God. The death of God, of the moral-metaphysical God, is an effect of religiosity . . . the charge that the faithful have killed God has an even more radical and perhaps scandalous significance; secularization, the departure from the sacred characteristics of Western modernity, is an occurrence within the history of Western religiosity.<sup>51</sup>

In Paul’s first letter to the Corinthian Christ followers, he writes to a church that had lost sight of the great thing; they had clung to things that mattered less than that which they were called to:

For now, we can only see a dim and blurry picture of things, as when we stare into polished metal. I realize that everything I know is only part of the big picture. But one day, when Jesus arrives, we will see clearly, face-to-face. In that day, I will fully know just as I have been wholly known by God. But now faith, hope, and love remain; these three virtues must characterize our lives.  
The greatest of these is love.<sup>52</sup>

Deconstruction of faith holds up a mirror to our faith. Our biases and slants are revealed. Our unknowing limitations and slants are exposed. Deconstruction is about letting go of faith. We live our lives in pieces. And yet our pieces are all we need to offer. Christ is the One who remakes our fractures into wholeness.

<sup>50</sup> Oh how I absolutely hate the term relevant. Please understand that this paper is not a call to coolness, relevance, or even culturally acceptable Christ following. The paper is written to examine the invitation a postmodern mind affords the entrenched version of modern Christianity. We can deconstruct this and see a new (not new) but renewed hope in the Church and in the way in which we can follow Christ.

<sup>51</sup> Gianni Vattimo, *After Christianity*, transla. Luca D’Isanto (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), Kindle, 381.

<sup>52</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:12-13 The Voice.

The task has ended. Go in pieces.  
Our faith has been rear-ended, certainty amended,  
and something might be mended that we didn't know was torn.  
And we are fire, bright, burning fire,  
turning from the higher places from which we fell,  
emptying ourselves into the hell in which we'll find  
our loving and beloved brother,  
mother, sister, father, friend.  
And so friends, the task has ended.  
Go in pieces  
to see and feel your world.

- Pádraig ÓTauma, *Go In Pieces*<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Pádraig ÓTuama, "Go In Pieces," YouTube, accessed August 2014,  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4n5VR8CV8dQ>.

## SECTION 03: THESIS

### Deconstruction of Faith

#### *Deconstruction Peels Back the Layers*

What happens when we come to the end of our “grid of understanding” for life as we have known it? When our world seems to crumble, what is left? When the answers we used to cling to slip through our fingers, does anything remain? When we find ourselves using words like doubt and abandonment when referring to God and matters of faith, what has changed? What is going on when our quest for answers, our foundation of certainty, and our expectations for life have been lost?

No one easily faces such questions. We often resist reflecting on our life when this kind of turmoil and disorientation affects us. But do we really want to ignore our doubts and tensions? Are we afraid our faith will not hold up? Are we concerned that we will no longer be accepted in our community of faith if we face the parts of our life that lead us into what seems to be darker-themed and tension-filled spaces? Do we fear that God is opposed to such questions? Do we think God will be absent in such a struggle?

Over the past decade, I feel like I have been in a place of questions, of doubts, of struggles, and of tension. The faith I had known, once so very passionate and intimate, was no longer the same. At times I still felt like something new was being birthed in my faith, but at other times, it seemed more like something in my faith was dying. I began to sense a kind of in-between-ness. It was as if I were standing in a doorway, neither being fully out of one room, nor fully entering the next. Even while planting Convergence, and as I continue to pastor our community now, that sense of in-between-ness continues. It was not my plan to face such doubts, fears, and shifting foundations. I did not go looking

for this kind turn in my faith. And yet, through the combination of so many life experiences, heartache, and even joy, I found a need to peel back the layers of my faith. In the work of Convergence and facing my own changing faith, I found others struggling.

. . . aware of the extreme complexities of their world and their faith, will never be satisfied with final interpretations . . . Since deconstruction and reconstruction are such fundamental characteristics of the emerging church, its practitioners are encouraged to give ample attention to these challenges and to model this activity for other churches.<sup>54</sup>

Lebanow echoes what so many people we have found are saying. Life is complex. Real are the struggles of every person. And yet, in many faith circles, the complexity is set aside for a more simplistic and sterile view of life. Before I even had language like deconstruction or reconstruction in regards to faith, we were planting a church that would bring together those who struggled with the complexities of life and the disorienting nature of their shifting faith. At the very heart of the work we have been doing here is a longing to see people enter a more healthy, loving, simple, open, honest, and authentic faith. In no way do I offer here a solution to the masses exiting the church at present. In no way do I wish to provide the “How To” of fixing struggles, doubts, tensions and fears within one’s faith. I even think it is the church’s obsession with fixing and solving and answering that has brought about much of the disorientation people feel in their faith.

However, I do not want to minimize the work I am doing, either. While it is not a “fix,” it is a story, if you will, of a way to approach Christ-following as a community that is willing to make space for those who are struggling to find a way to hang on to a changing faith. I have found friends on my journey within my disoriented faith. Together,

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<sup>54</sup> Cory E. Lebanow, *Evangelicalism and the Emerging Church: A Congregational Study of a Vineyard Church* (Surrey, England: Ashgate Publishing Company 2009), 124.

we have explored an expression of faith that sees life with Christ as an ongoing process, to be worked out alongside community, being awake and aware of life within and all around, and embracing the mystery and beauty of life. What is now a present growing hope within our faith came first as a disorienting shift in our faith—followed by an effort to deconstruct our barely noticeable faith.

Deconstruction is a way of reading texts—philosophical texts—with the intention of making these texts question themselves, forcing them to take account of their own contradictions, and exposing the antagonisms they have ignored or repressed.<sup>55</sup>

Norris describes a process of questioning and considering the contradictions within that which is deconstructed. If deconstruction is being honest about contradictions and tensions, exposing power plays and broken systems, unearthing things repressed or ignored, being honest about limitations, shedding light on other perspectives, and dismantling what is—then everyone’s faith could benefit from deconstruction. While such a process may sound gruelingly negative, deconstruction, while having seasons of edge and angst, provides a great deal of hope. Deconstruction of faith, in all of its nuances and expressions, can shape a new vitality of faith. Martin writes, “Deconstruction, as it turns out, is a way of doing the truth, of keeping things authentic, of living in faith, impassioned by a desire for the undeconstructible.”<sup>56</sup> Deconstruction is the pursuit of what matters, leaving behind the minutiae that often take center stage. It is

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<sup>55</sup> Saul Newman, “Derrida’s Deconstruction of Authority,” The Anarchist Library, 2011, accessed October 11, 2015, <http://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/saul-newman-derrida-s-deconstruction-of-authority>.

“Christopher Norris defines deconstruction as a series of moves, which include the dismantling of conceptual oppositions and hierarchical systems of thought, and an unmasking of ‘aporias’ and moments of self-contradiction in philosophy.”

<sup>56</sup> David Martin, *Religion and Power: No Logos without Mythos* (London: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2014), Kindle 742.

a peeling back of the layers of one's shifting faith to find what remains. It seeks to find that which is essential, authentic, and vulnerable.

### *The Roots of Deconstruction*

First, an exploration of the basics of deconstruction philosophy is necessary, for it shapes one's approach to a faith that moves forward. Deconstruction is a postmodern movement—a reaction born out of the failings of modernity, which sought to answer, control, and conquer all matters of life. Modernity, and often the faith of the western evangelicalism with which I am most familiar, has tried to encapsulate matters of faith with answers, certainty, confidence, and systems.<sup>57</sup>

### *Deconstruction Resists Oversimplification*

Nutshells enclose and encapsulate, shelter and protect, reduce and simplify, while everything in deconstruction is turned toward opening, exposure, expansion, and complexification, toward releasing unheard-of, undreamt-of possibilities to come, toward cracking nutshells wherever they appear.<sup>58</sup>

Deconstruction responds to understandings that have been oversimplified. For the purposes of this work, the philosophy essentially exerts that faith cannot be summed up or reduced into a mere nutshell. So much of faith has become sloganized and sermonized to the point of meaninglessness for many. “Truth” is proclaimed with no sense of the complexity of life and faith. Deconstructionists acknowledge that there is always more going on than a pithy summation of things presented in a nutshell. When one reduces

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<sup>57</sup> This is by no means the extent of my exploration of deconstruction philosophy. I will not leave the topic through the entirety of research, but my concern is less about defining deconstruction and applying it in matters of faith. Other works can be found to define and more deeply encounter the many intricacies of this philosophy.

<sup>58</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*, edited with a Commentary by John D. Caputo (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), 31.

aspects of life to a simple, tension-free formula, it is a nutshell that must be cracked.

What does it hurt to acknowledge that pain or struggle may very well be involved in even the most vital aspects of faith? Deconstruction authentically sheds light on such things.

Deconstruction asks, where is the tension? Is this the only view? What are the perspectives at work? What is the history of this conversation? Where is the power play?

What contradictions are being ignored? Who am I alienating? What assumptions am I making?

Whenever it runs up against a limit, deconstruction presses against it. Whenever deconstruction finds a nutshell—a secure axiom or a pithy maxim—the very idea is to crack it open and disturb this tranquility. Indeed, that is a good rule of thumb in deconstruction. That is what deconstruction is all about, its very meaning and mission, if it has any. One might even say that cracking nutshells is what a deconstruction is: In a nutshell.<sup>59</sup>

Deconstructionist thinking takes such enclosures and shelters and “cracks” them, in order to open, expose, and expand our faith.<sup>60</sup> In some ways, deconstruction will simplify. The process takes all the “extras” around our faith and considers what is essential. But in the same way, deconstruction can bring complexity.<sup>61</sup> Taking the narrow and simplistic perspectives of the faith that have found root, likely, through limited exposure to other perspectives, it identifies the tension inherent within the faith.

Paul encouraged the Corinthian church to move beyond a simplistic perspective when he challenged, “I nursed you with milk, as a mother would feed her baby, because you were not, and still are not, developed enough to digest complex spiritual food” (1

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>61</sup> Ron Martoia, *The Bible as Improv: Seeing and Living the Script in New Ways* (Nashville, TN: Zondervan, 2010), Kindle 1201.



Corinthians 3:2, The Voice). He was referring to those who claimed to special status by the apostle who baptized them. This is an insignificant perspective that rooted itself in the first-century church. Divisions. Measuring value and power. Dividing who is in and out. Claiming insight over others. While the specific arguments of today may be different, the kind of divisions and power plays leaving so many to feel they no longer belong in their faith remain the same. Deconstruction can offer multi-faceted perspectives that allow for the complexity of a diversity of stories, an openness to others' experiences, and compassion for those who feel like they no longer belong.

### *Deconstruction Remains Within*

Taylor writes in his book *Erring*, "Deconstruction itself is at one and the same time inside and outside the network that it questions."<sup>62</sup> There even exists tension in the way one does deconstruction. Taylor's words express my own position while deconstructing faith. I stand within the Christianity camp, willing and hope-filled, I want to continue on in faith. I continually see the Light of Christ pouring into and through lives in ways that express love and grace. And yet I also stand on the outside, ashamed of the narrowness in which we translate what it is to walk with Christ. The dominant voice of Christianity can often be judgmental, black and white, with very little grace or room to wrestle with life. At these times, I want all the distance I can have from what is expressed as Christianity. Taylor acknowledges the position one is in when deconstructing faith. It is difficult to deconstruct something you are emotionally, relationally, and spiritually tied to. Blinders can obscure the view of what has become unhealthy and unhelpful in faith.

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<sup>62</sup> Mark C. Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 10.

Deconstruction is impossible if you are unwilling to stand at a distance and try to see the whole landscape. And yet, deconstruction becomes merely destruction when one remains entirely distant from that which is being deconstructed. Remaining outside the faith allows for one to hold nothing precious or sacred, to have no intimate connection. True deconstruction is costly. Gerald May writes, “We cling to things, people, beliefs, and behaviors not because we love them, but because we are terrified of losing them.”<sup>63</sup> The deconstruction process is thoroughly difficult because of one’s deep ties to their faith. It hurts to let go of things being deconstructed. However, deconstruction is never vital unless you are in that which is being deconstructed. When you are within that which you deconstruct, you are bringing a sense of the cost of losing and the hope of renewing your faith.

Convergence could not be a disorienting community that develops practices of deconstruction of the Christian faith if we were not a Christian community. But we would be unwilling to deconstruct as thoroughly as we have if we were not also willing to lose our Christianity. Does this not seem like the Gospel?

If any one of you wants to follow Me, you will have to give yourself up to God’s plan, take up your cross, and do as I do. For any one of you who wants to be rescued will lose your life, but any one of you who loses your life for My sake and for the sake of this good news will be liberated. (Mark 8:34-35, The Voice)

The call seems to hold nothing so sacred that we cannot leave it behind, but this is not seen as a loss, but a freedom toward life. Is this version of faith so dear that one cannot separate from it if even if it means seeing Christ in a new light? Gerald May encourages letting go of attachment, knowing that love results from such a freedom; we

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<sup>63</sup> Gerald May, *The Dark Night of the Soul* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004), Kindle 600.

want to be free, compassionate, and happy, but in the face of our attachments we are clinging, grasping, and fearfully self-absorbed.<sup>64</sup>

John Caputo says that deconstruction actually affirms our greatest hopes for Christ restoring our world—the act of deconstructing reshapes our faith for a greater vitality and hope. Deconstruction uses a vantage point from within the faith—a shifting faith, but also steps outside the trauma of disoriented faith to look upon it from the outside.<sup>65</sup> Deconstruction begins with a willingness to listen to those outside one’s perspective in order view the thing being deconstructed with new eyes. However, deconstruction also has an insider element to it. One cannot merely be outside critiquing something, remaining distant. This will undoubtedly result in destruction of the thing. Destruction is never the goal. “Derrida himself insists, ‘deconstruction has nothing to do with destruction.’ Instead, deconstruction aims to ‘dismantle . . . metaphysical and rhetorical structures . . . not in order to reject or discard them, but to reconstitute them in another way.’”<sup>66</sup> Deconstruction is not a critique of something that one is distant from, but a reshaping of something that will have implications in one’s own life. Therefore, one deconstructs faith in order to continue in faith—but to continue differently. Derrida says

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<sup>64</sup> Gerald May, *The Dark Night of the Soul* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004), Kindle 600.

<sup>65</sup> James H. Oldhuis, *Religion With/Out Religion: The Prayers and Tears of John D. Caputo* (London, UK: Routledge, 2003), Kindle 602.

“Caputo argues, deconstruction is not against religion, faith, or even God. He goes so far as to say that deconstruction involves a certain affirmation of what takes place in the discourses and practices, words and deeds, of human religious life.”

<sup>66</sup> Downing, *Changing Signs of Truth*, Kindle 1710.

deconstruction results in both something given to us and something “absolutely new”—a break from what was.<sup>67</sup>

*Deconstruction Lives in Tension*

Deconstruction is a matter of acknowledging, struggling with, and living within the tensions that arise from the clash of ordinary everyday human experience and a holy faith. Deconstruction is not a move toward rectifying these strains and stresses but living within the overlap, finding peace in such fluidity, finding holiness in such paradox. For our purposes, if deconstruction was shown in a Venn diagram, everyday life would overlap our holy faith. In that overlap is the deconstruction. It is the overlap of the human and divine event in our faith. It is human in that it reminds of the highest highs and lowest lows we can rise or sink to. Deconstruction acknowledges the enigmatic beauty and tragedy of human life. Deconstruction also acknowledges that there is more going on: more underlying, more above, and more within the storyline. Referring to the underlying (or above, under, within, etc.) of the story makes room for the Divine. There is much more going on than what one may see. Deconstruction offers an invitation to reconnect with relationship—to live with one another and with the One in whom humanity is most intimately tied. Deconstruction is about relationship and reshaping. One’s faith must not be devoid of the relational connection with neighbors, with self, with God, and with the other—those who are altogether different than oneself. Faith must also hold within it a fluid sense of re-make-ability. Faith must be remade over and over again.

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<sup>67</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*, edited with a Commentary by John D. Caputo (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), 6.

*Deconstruction is like Cartography in the Dark*

Kathy Escobar writes, “We can lose old beliefs without losing God. We can escape all we have once known and still enjoy a deep faith if we want one. We can shed theologies and emerge with new passion and purpose.”<sup>68</sup>

Escobar’s words are like a breath of fresh air. God is not contained in our belief systems. Losing beliefs that are leading us away from love and grace actually lead us to see the nearness of God. To lose, often, is to gain life with God. Does this not already sound like the Good News Christ proclaimed and exemplified? Convergence has worked to build in language and practices of ritualizing the loss of faith, being present with others in their disorientation, and embracing mystery. Deconstruction of faith has become a way to move forward, within a new and more fluid foundation to reconstruct faith and continually evolve within this reshaped faith. Derrida writes, “Christianity is the only mad religion; which is perhaps, the explanation for its survival—it deconstructs itself and survives by deconstructing itself.”<sup>69</sup> This description of Christianity very different from the one many of us have experienced. Is Christianity the beacon for shifting understandings, for questioning and reshaping? Many of those within Christianity, in my experience, have been anything but progressively evaluating and reevaluating their faith. There is often a sense of certainty, concreteness, and lack of fluidity to the Christianity I have been most closely associated with. That is, until we began Convergence. By including a value of deconstruction, faith then becomes the locale to encourage fluidity

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<sup>68</sup> Kathy Escobar, *Faith Shift: Finding Your Way Forward When Everything You Believe Is Coming Apart* (Carol Stream, IL: Convergent, 2014), Kindle 223.

<sup>69</sup> Gerardo Marti, *The Deconstructed Church: Understanding Emerging Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), Kindle 113.

and movement. It is within faith that one can encounter both the loss of faith and rebirth of faith and continue this cycle over and over again.

Integrating deconstruction as a regular part of faith provides a framework to process change and disorientation within worldview shifts. It is within such a deconstruction process that one discovers a more robust language, the value of reflective practices, and a healthier lens for life. A community of faith can help navigate the struggles and devastation of a loss of faith with presence and grace. It is within this navigating process (not a formal one) that a simplicity and complexity find their relationship—their tension. Len Sweet refers to this relationship as simplicity. “Simplicity yokes the simple and the complex. The mystery of simplicity is the complex embracing the simple and the rational embracing the incomprehensible.”<sup>70</sup>

The ability to hold these kinds of tensions together has been only one of the great values found in the Semiotics Program headed by Dr. Leonard Sweet. The work of Convergence has been enhanced by engaging in semiotics, the study of signs and symbols that shape culture. The terrain of culture and certainly the typography of deconstructing faith are quite tricky. It is a road that few understand and are willing to engage. Downing writes:

Even the most detailed map cannot tell drivers how to handle new construction, geological changes, storms, detours and accidents. Therefore, without giving up on the final destination or the guidance of the original map, Christians must venture out on new routes as the signs of culture change, sometimes altering their own signs to aid those who have never studied the map. “The true quality of a sign,” as Raymond Williams explains, “is that it is effective in communication.”

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<sup>70</sup> Leonard Sweet, *Viral How Social Networking Is Poised to Ignite Revival*. (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook Press, 2012), 44.

Hence, “as a function of continuing social activity [a sign] is capable of modification and development.”<sup>71</sup>

This is where semiotics and deconstruction of faith find their relationship—as a kind of map-making in the dark.<sup>72</sup> It is a new map that is being charted, not because it is novel or cool or the answer to the many crises the church seems to be facing today; no, it is a new map, born out of tears and conversations and loneliness that so many are encountering as their once-certain faith is now becoming disorienting.

### *Deconstruction Reframes Faith*

The new map is built upon what was, with the full understanding that one’s current (or past) faith has limitations. Facing such a reality leads to the healthy deconstruction of faith, which means letting go of *the way things were*. This is not a phase. Deconstruction shapes a new way of faith. Giving up on *the way things were* is difficult in any area of life, and may be most difficult in areas regarding faith.

It may sound as if deconstruction is calling for a disregard of the history and the ancientness of the Christian faith. However, this is not at all the quest. In fact, the hope is that a deconstruction of faith will include the recovery of the some of the roots of faith. It is the limitations of faith that one deconstructs. It is the way in which one has attached

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<sup>71</sup> Crystal L. Downing, *Changing Signs of Truth: A Christian Introduction to the Semiotics of Communication* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), Kindle 137.

<sup>72</sup> “Unlimited Semiosis,” Oswego State University of NY, Semiotics Glossary U, accessed June 15, 2015, <http://www.cs.oswego.edu/~blue/xhx/books/semiotics/glossaryU/section41/main.html>.

Another way in which semiotics and the deconstruction process find a relationship is in their need to be endlessly applied. It is a cycle process, not a once and for all application. Just as the process of deconstruction is an endless cycle of tearing down, simplifying, and rebuilding, the process of semiotics is endlessly rich and ongoing. “Umberto Eco coined the term ‘unlimited semiosis’ to refer to the way in which, for Peirce (via the ‘interpretant’), for Barthes (via connotation), for Derrida (via ‘free play’) and for Lacan (via ‘the sliding signified’), the signified is endlessly commutable—functioning in its turn as a signifier for a further signified.”

too much to faith that will be lost. The vantage point of our faith is being expanded through deconstruction—to be honest and upfront about the limitations and expectations that cannot be met through one's faith. While deconstruction will reduce those expectations, limitations to what our faith can be will always remain.

Moving forward with the awareness that faith is unable to answer every question, to overcome every challenge, or to resolve all doubt or struggle makes room for an expanded faith. Martoia writes about a stage of life where the illusions have been let go of—making room for faith to be reframed.

Certainty gives way to humility. The premium value of knowing it all and having everything screwed down gives way to a chastened rationality that is now tempered by intuitional and spiritual rumblings that occur at suprarational levels. By this stage in life we have lived as adults for a couple of decades. We have seen death, maybe that of close friends. We have seen our kids become teenagers and young adults, and we have seen parents grow old and die. The cumulative impact of these events causes us to wonder about and question whether the pat standard answers are adequate to bear the burden of real life. For some people they are; for others they are not.

In this place of reflection we come to see that some questions are simply unanswerable. What would previously have been a disquieted mind—torn by not getting all the answers to cohere—now gives way to a mind of quiet peace that can hold ambiguity, mystery, unanswerables, paradox, and the unknown. In some ways, God may seem bigger at this stage of faith—a God whose magnitude is appropriate to the magnitude of life and global issues.<sup>73</sup>

The faith that is being described has transitioned to a much more relationally focused faith, one where there is presence in the present tensions of life. Even though life may feel up in the air, faith is there, through a deconstruction process, to shape one's life within that which remains unresolved. Deconstruction carries within it a value for

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<sup>73</sup> Ron Martoia, *The Bible as Improv: Seeing and Living the Script in New Ways* (Nashville, TN: Zondervan, 2010), Kindle 1193.



process. While beginnings and ends are certainly important, the process between is where the life of faith is nurtured.

### Contemplative Prayer

#### *Seeing Meaning Everywhere, or Reflecting on All of Life*

Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery that it is. In the boredom and pain of it no less than in the excitement and gladness, touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace.

- George Connor<sup>74</sup>

Fr. Richard Rohr writes, ““God comes to you disguised as your life,”” as my friend Paula D’Arcy so wisely says” and continues, “You can see how merely believing doctrines and practicing rituals is very often a clever diversionary tactic to avoid my actual life—to avoid the agenda that is right in front of me every day, which is always messy, always muddy, always mundane, always ordinary—and all around me.”<sup>75</sup> The contemplative life—a prayerful life, an awakened life—is one that finds God present in the everyday. Meaningfulness is everywhere.

On the outset of planting a church community in 2004, we felt strongly about a few things. Church should be uncompromisingly relational. We also felt that faith should saturate all of life—not just an additional *God* area to a compartmentalized life. We spoke of *merging God and life*; in fact, the original name of our community was Fusion. These passions were enough to gather a few of us together to do community.

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<sup>74</sup> George Connor, ed., *Listening to Your Life: Daily Meditations with Frederick Buchner* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1992), 2.

<sup>75</sup> Richard Rohr, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2011), Kindle 1253.

With a bent toward the contemplative, together we explored an ancient faith that many of us had only sparingly accessed prior to our coming together. Reading, praying, listening, and awareness all began to take on a greater depth. We had awoken to the voices of older Christ followers—the mystics, the desert fathers and mothers, and current pilgrims on an inward path. We were discovering a new language that resonated deeply. Conversations with Ron Martoia became a big influence in our community, using language that expressed our desire of a full-bodied expression of faith that includes a more deeply spiritual, more deeply thinking, more deeply feeling, and more deeply connected version of Christ following.

It is in the contemplative way of prayer that one can deconstruct a lack of awareness or a coma-like existence. Tomlinson writes,

Most of the time, most of us are unaware of this greater reality behind things. We are immersed in the mundane, preoccupied with the outward world. The interior or spiritual dimension remains hidden; God seems absent. Yet a mystic loiters within each of us, waiting to be noticed and nurtured.<sup>76</sup>

Our community, Convergence, encourages self-reflection, considering the image of God in others, and wrestling with themes of true self and false self. It is all in an effort to deconstruct faith, moving toward a faith that finds the Divine saturating all of life.

Kester Brewin captures the contemplative way when he writes in *Other*,

This is our simple goal in self-reflection: to become conscious of our ‘selves’ — to better understand the flows and processes that make up who we are, and through this consciousness, to evolve into more responsible organisms that can then go on to help others achieve the same thing.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Dave Tomlinson and Rob Pepper, *How to Be a Bad Christian: And a Better Human Being* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2012), Kindle 218.

<sup>77</sup> Kester Brewin, *Other: Loving Self, God and Neighbour in a World of Fractures* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2010), 24.

### *Kataphatic and Apophatic*

The influence of contemplative prayer has brought our community a broader understanding of prayer and the practices that can awaken us to God. For much of my life, prayer was equated with words. Words that were at times meaningful, at other times contrived. One of the reasons for disorientation can be the wordiness of one's faith—the endless answers and explanations that find their way in many versions of faith. Words are beautiful and good. Many words can even multiply such beauty and goodness. However, the wordiness I am broaching is the effort to over-define, control, and dictate. Often, words become boundary markers rather than vehicles for relationship and life. Jeremy Young writes:

In general, spiritual life begins with the communication of such accessible images of God (kataphatic) and is nourished by reflection upon them. However, there is a danger in using such images of God. Since the divinity cannot be adequately represented by any of them, they are only limited and partial expressions of the mystery which we call God. The danger is that believers may come to treat these images as if they were true and final representations of the nature of the divinity, and refuse to consider any alternative depictions.<sup>78</sup>

Young continues by saying that Christians who are engaging in a quest for certainty have missed out on the mystery of God. Much of the Western evangelical version of faith that has been my home has relied almost entirely on the kataphatic tradition. However, ancient Christianity made room for both the kataphatic and the apophatic.

The apophatic tradition is a wordlessness or negative and paradoxical use of words.<sup>79</sup> The apophatic is found in the ancient mystic and contemplative expressions of

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<sup>78</sup> Jeremy Young, *The Cost of Certainty* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 2006), 142.

<sup>79</sup> William Franke, *On What Cannot Be Said: Apophatic Discourses in Philosophy, Religion, Literature, and the Arts* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2007), 285.

the Christian faith.<sup>80</sup> For example, God may be described, negatively, as unlimited, unknowable or uncreated or, paradoxically, as three and one or as first and last. Such negative or paradoxical descriptions of God puzzle the human intellect, and should ensure that it does not fall into the delusion that it has understood, or can ever understand, the mystery of God.<sup>81</sup>

The apophatic tradition has brought about the language of *via negativa* (the way of the negative), which has been a refreshing adoption for Convergence as we seek to find language that both defines God and leaves room for the mystery and paradox of God. Entering into deconstruction means not overly defining, but being open to a reworking of language; therefore, referring to God's ineffability has been both healing and worshipful for Convergence. It is within both the kataphatic and apophatic traditions that a way of prayer can be found that deconstructs faith.

### *Silence as a New Language of Faith*

"Maybe God is waiting for us to be silent long enough so He may begin painting a new picture in our imaginations, to begin transforming our image of a manageable deity into one that can truly inspire," writes Skye Jethani.<sup>82</sup> Jethani's statement has inspired a great deal of consideration for the apophatic tradition. The apophatic tradition has introduced silence, or centering prayer, to the practice of faith. Within the practice of

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<sup>80</sup> Young, *The Cost of Certainty*, 143.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Skye Jethani, *The Divine Commodity: Discovering a Faith Beyond Consumer Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 45.

silence, we encounter a nearness of God's presence and a connectedness to all things.<sup>83</sup> Through silence, one not only draws near to God, but also finds new lenses with which to view the world. Silence is not isolation but nearness to God and to others. Martin Laird writes, "The journey into God and the profound meeting of others in the inner ground of silence is a single movement."<sup>84</sup> We can be more present to God, more present to self, and more present to others through the wisdom of the apophatic way. Deconstruction includes this intentional move into the silence of the apophatic tradition.

We gain the capacity for reflection, for letting the world and things and others mirror within us, rather than ceaselessly going from one activity to the next. We realize that our activity had become an addiction. We gain a newfound creativity and insights, new ideas, and new ways of seeing come again. But all these results are by-products of Silence and not reasons for becoming intrigued with it. To focus prematurely on its gifts—to ask what this experience will do for me—severely limits how deep we are able to go into the Silence, and makes us complacent and satisfied with mere imitations of the phenomenon.<sup>85</sup>

Reflection is a key to deconstruction. To find any sense of peace and calm when life seems upside down, one must learn to pause, look inward, and be aware of the life all around. Henri Nouwen calls silence "the furnace of transformation."<sup>86</sup> Transformation—

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<sup>83</sup> Robert Sardello, *Silence: The Mystery of Wholeness* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2008), 354, Kindle.

<sup>84</sup> Martin Laird, *Into the Silent Land: A Guide to the Christian Practice of Contemplation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), Kindle 230.

<sup>85</sup> Robert Sardello, *Silence: The Mystery of Wholeness* (Berkeley CA: North Atlantic Books, 2011), Kindle 354.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 471.

consider this word as describing the possibility of both a subtle evolutionary change and a sudden revolutionary change—is the very thing deconstruction seeks. Deconstruction is about a new life, a new way, a new faith—transformed from what was once familiar, but has now become disorienting.

### *Silence as Common Ground*

Rather than merely denouncing atheism, faith needs to seek a contemporary means to meet the godless, in sympathy and compassion. This means discovering an experience in common. We can find this common experience in the silence of God. Differently interpreted as it may be, it remains a common ground in which the word of faith can be transmitted.<sup>87</sup>

In light of the rise of fundamentalism and atheism discussed earlier, deconstruction offers a third way to understand disoriented faith. John Main notes that the silence of God opens our eyes to the tug of atheism. Silence is hard to deal with. Silence is open to many different interpretations. And, certainly, silence can mean absence and absence can even mean non-existence. Silence provides Christians with an overlapping experience with the atheist. Main is making a case for room to be made in Christianity to not only acknowledge, but also live within, the silence of God when it comes.

Our community has found it to be vital that we are honest about the silence of God and that we include stories of such silence are shared in vulnerable and authentic ways. It is important for us not to rush to fix or rescue those finding such difficulty in the silence, but to reframe a vision of God that inspires us to seek out relationship.

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<sup>87</sup> John Main, *The Way of Unknowing* (London: Canterbury Press, 2011), 5.

## Community

### *Creating Relational Space*

Just as deconstructing something from a distance, not remaining in that which one deconstructs, tends toward destruction, deconstructing faith without shared community bends toward a destructive end for faith. Too often the church speaks of unconditional love, but expects a sense of conformity. Those with tough questions, those struggling to move forward, or those who simply speak authentically do not always find it easy to fit in to the life of a given church. Young states:

The Christian faith may easily become an emotional, intellectual or spiritual prison, inhibiting the growth of churchgoers towards both psychological and spiritual maturity. The Christian gospel claims that “the truth will set you free” (John 8:32), but often the experience of living as a Christian in the Church is the exact opposite. Rather than being liberated from false restraints upon their lives, Christians frequently seem afraid of doing the “wrong” thing or expressing the “wrong” opinion. They may be excessively concerned about what others in their church or prayer group think about them, or express anxiety about whether or not God really loves them. They may even worry about whether or not they are damned. Fear and love are incompatible in Christian teaching, but fear, or at least anxiety, is one of the commonest of emotional states amongst the devout. It appears to be endemic to Christians.<sup>88</sup>

Through the years of shaping an approach to deconstructing faith, our community has sought to make room for being honest about the struggle of faith and to give voice to a variety of perspectives. Our desire is to create space for relationship to thrive.

Community is not perfect; it will always include the act of mending and breaking relationships. This is the risk of shared life—knowing that failure is sure, but that beauty is equally certain. Just as the individual life of faith is a process, so is the shared faith of a community.

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<sup>88</sup> Jeremy Young, *The Cost of Certainty* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 2006), 3.

Our current language for the role of community is found in the following statement: “The Convergence Community is creating relational space to embrace story, mystery, and collaboration, to live out the Restorative Way of Jesus.” We are a simple community trying to shape a life together that makes room for others and a growing and often changing faith.

For most of us, as a community, even the concept of church has been a matter of deconstruction. Stories of pain and burnout exist. But, within our community, there is also a sense of no longer understanding the language and activity of the church. In many ways, church has had to be un-learned and re-imagined.

To best reframe church, new metaphors are needed. Church is not a building. Church is not a day or time. Church is not even a set of beliefs. We have come up with some metaphors that have helped our process of deconstruction—giving us a new hope for life within a community of faith. The following metaphors speak to our process, but they do not fully capture all the beautiful metaphors that are out there to be discovered and created.

#### *Metaphor: Story*

Embracing story means to make room for and to graciously consider our own life, others’ lives, and the larger Story of life and God. Our lives are all unfolding stories, unfinished, and filled with both brokenness and beauty. To embrace story is to believe that everyone lives out a valuable story and that all these stories are connected to one another and to the Divine. To embrace story is to move beyond our *ego-centered universe* to see others as worthy of love (“love your neighbor as yourself” in the words of Jesus) and worth listening to. We want to go through the conflicting process—the



deconstructing process—of seeing enemies as no different than ourselves, with stories of brokenness and beauty (“love your enemies,” again, in the words of Jesus).

*Metaphor: Mystery*

To embrace mystery is to take the cue from Paul’s words, “We see through a glass darkly,”<sup>89</sup> and let things be a little blurry in life—a little undefined—which makes us more open and compassionate people. When you think you have all the answers, how well do you listen? When you are confident things are a certain way, how can you be teachable and malleable? Holding our views loosely does not mean we should not believe something; it just means maybe we should be willing and open to edit as we go through life—as we meet and suffer with others, as we are confronted with life circumstances and enemies and mysteries and chaos and others who do not fit within our well-polished lenses. We let go of a need to control life and choose to be present within life.

*Metaphor: Table*

As a community, we *embrace collaboration*, believing that it is a shared life that is the fullest. It’s when we let others in our life and when we join others for a common way that we see so much more value in life. Collaboration is a value we all often resist. Consider the dinner table. When asking others over, do you more willingly cook the entire dinner to “present” to your guests? Or do you invite them to bring a dish to combine with your offering?

The imagery of the table and the language of *collaboration* communicates the fragility and strength of community life. It is fragile in the way it calls for a shared

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<sup>89</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:12 KJV.

responsibility. But it is also strong in the way it relies on a shared responsibility. Just like a potluck meal, if no one brings anything the dinner is scarce. However, when everyone contributes, there is no better meal. Collaboration means that the community is viable only as relationships are viable—not relationships for the sake of organization. As we come together, we build a life together so we might be aware of God and respond to his invitation to love.

### **The Arts**

The arts have played a significant role in the life of Convergence Community. The arts thrive on the mysterious, the open-ended, the un-concluded. Imagination is about letting oneself wander down paths without knowing the end result; creativity is about exploration. If Christianity can exist in realm where one comes to terms with uncertainty and lack of control of life, then the arts can aid in this reshaping of a new way of faith. Being in a creative, imaginative, art-filled environment conditions one to be more comfortable with the open-ended. The arts provoke a community of faith to face questions, doubts, and perspectives that reshape faith to embrace mystery.

#### *Art Deconstructs*

The function of imagination is not to make strange things settled, so much as to make settled things strange; not so much to make wonders facts as to make facts wonders.

—G.K. Chesterton<sup>90</sup>

What we think we know, what we think we see, what we become accustomed to, can all be challenged through the arts. Jesus used stories to do his deconstructing.

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<sup>90</sup> G.K. Chesterton, *The Defendant* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1902), 60.

Parables such as the Good Samaritan deconstructed deeply held prejudices against the Samaritans. To make the hero of the story from a despised race, a Samaritan, disoriented the Jewish understanding of good, of God, and of their own flawed value system. By using a story, Jesus artfully gains their attention and calculatingly exposes their lens of prejudice. The mystery and imagination inherent within art makes space to deconstruct our patterns and labels.

There may be no time when our imaginations are running as low as when we label people. We think to ourselves, glibly, she's the smart one, or he's the office clown, or she's the pretty one, or he's the nerd, or she's the geek who I want to sit next to in math class, or he is the athletic one who's not so bright, or she is the spiritual one and I don't want to get into a long conversation with her. We so limit the other person when we do this; but what is equally sad is that we limit what that person could become—plus what might become of our relationship with that person.<sup>91</sup>

### *Art is Inconclusive*

I am an unknowing midwife at best—  
unaware of what the encounter will birth.

- Bob Ekblad<sup>92</sup>

The influence of the arts in a community of faith will most certainly mean that the process is the focus, rather than the conclusion. In fact, most of the time, the environment fostered by the arts in a church will mean an increase of messiness. Art does not always connect the dots, nor does life always see the expected end. A deconstructing faith can sustain the tensions, the messiness, the unknown. A community that engages in, encourages, and is hospitable to creatives must be willing to live with the open-ended. The arts make room for people to deal with their internal tensions toward faith and

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<sup>91</sup> Timothy W. Ross, Michael Sares, Deborah Dean Murphy, and Derek L. Pennwell, *From Each Brave Eye: Reflections on the Arts, Ministry, and Holy Imagination* (Shook Foil Books, 2013), Kindle 202.

<sup>92</sup> Bob Ekblad, *Reading the Bible with the Damned* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), Kindle 350.

expose or even magnify the search for certainty and control. The inconclusive nature of art may be its most deconstructive quality. Art can disrupt and open dialogue. Art can illuminate and open insight. Art can inspire and open perspective. Art can shock and open eyes. Art opens to the complex, not a simplistic and clichéd view of life and faith. Art has this “let those who have ears, hear” kind of quality. Paul writes, “Awake, you sleeper! Rise from your grave, and the Anointed One will shine on you” (Ephesians 5:14 The Voice). Within the arts there exists a call to have your ears open, your eyes wide.

Art deconstructs our simplistic notions of faith and life. In the arts, this acknowledgment of the tensions, complexities, and struggles actually comforts those who feel alienated by a Christianity of simplistic solutions and quick answers. People long to hear that they are not alone in their struggles. People rise to the occasion of compassion and solidarity when the environment is authentic and vulnerable.

After a decade of leading a community that has nurtured artists, has been exposed to art, and has actively participated in reflecting on and creating art, I cannot imagine faith without the arts. The faith I now grow in and lead with includes the arts so naturally that it is difficult to distinguish where the value of the arts is not integral. In fact, our prayer when considering the arts has been:

*A Prayer to Encounter Art*

*May our encounter with the art and artist  
be also an encounter with You.  
Let the Story live on in us,  
as we imagine the Story anew.  
Let us not avoid what stirs,  
reflecting on our life,  
feeling deeply within us,  
seeing the artwork before us as mirror.  
May our world be expanded,*

*viewing from the slant of others;  
by the mysteries of God ever growing,  
leading us to step out of our myopia,  
and letting go of our tight grip of control.*

*Let us taste and see.*<sup>93</sup>

## **Conclusion**

### *Disorientation and the Human Experience*

At some point, reality sets in; life unfolds apart from one's control. If one lives long enough, the hopes and expectations that were once held no longer match up with reality. Maybe life falls short or even exceeds expectation. If someone has not come to the conclusion that they are not in control of life, they will. This is the kind of awareness that disorients. It is the kind of realization that can turn faith upside down. And it is this kind of trauma to faith that brings many to struggle with new questions and new perspectives that leave them wondering if faith is worth hanging on to. Is there any value to faith if it does not provide the kind of certainty and solid ground it once seemed to offer? It is within such wrestling that deconstruction can provide reframing of faith.

Deconstruction of faith involves an appreciation for the process, an authentic shared life, silence and reflection, and exposure to the voice of the other. Deconstruction provides a new and budding hope for those disoriented in their faith.

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<sup>93</sup> Scott Scrivner, "Encountering Art Prayer," 2014, accessed December 10, 2015, <http://www.convergenceokc.org/contemplative-prayer/>

*Hope Remains*

I believe the church can exist more authentically, being more honest about the process of faith rather than offering simple and cliché answers. I believe the church can actually give voice and expression to the rawness that life creates in us. I believe the church can name and open doors for people to enter dark nights, liminal space, and the disorientation of loss, love, and uncertainty. The church need not be the walls of safety from life, but the community who sees real life as it is—making no excuses for it or oversimplifying it. The church can be a people who are Christ within life no matter the beauty or the darkness, no matter the gain or the loss. The church can offer language and a way to deconstruct the failed pursuits of certainty and conclusion. The work of the church is more about awareness of life, of sharing life, than it is escaping it.

#### SECTION 04: ARTIFACT DESCRIPTION

The work of deconstructing faith is not primarily a theory on the way the Church can remain vital in the wake of the masses of people leaving. The work of deconstruction is really about individuals and communities of faith providing space to process the complexity of life and the tensions found within faith. Deconstructing faith calls for a highly practical response in creating a safe space to dialogue, reflect, and express a new language of faith.

The artifact I am including with the work of my dissertation offers an interactive guide for individuals and groups to engage in the arts, community dialogue, and contemplative prayer for the purpose of deconstructing faith. The book I am proposing is *Life in Review: An Interactive Guide to Deconstructing Faith toward Hope*. It is a work of non-fiction that is part spiritual director, part art experience, and part story. It is full of contemplative practices to help process a faith full of doubts, struggles, and uncertainty. The book has photography, my own original art/graphic design, and other art from artists whom I follow and respect. Using the arts, contemplative prayer practices, and interaction, I am sharing ways to engage and reflect on one's own life and faith. The book invites readers to reflect on and write their own story within the interactive pages. *Life in Review* guides readers to not only reflect on their life, but also to deconstruct or reshape their faith, in order to rediscover the hope of Christ, who encounters the dark nights, the liminal space, the silence, along with us.

## SECTION 05: ARTIFACT SPECIFICATION

January 1, 2016

Kimberly Shumate  
Living Word Literary Agency  
PO Box 40974, Eugene OR 97404

Dear Ms. Shumate:

I was so very impressed with you and your reputation as a book agent from our very first conversation a few months ago. It was obvious to me that your experience and expertise has forged much wisdom in the publishing arena.

I am excited to be writing my first book, *Life in Review: An Interactive Guide to Deconstruct Faith toward Hope*. The book considers the value of deconstructing faith through a combination of contemplative practices, stories, artwork, and creative interaction. It is not a passive experience to deconstruct faith, and it is certainly not an academic exercise. So, this book provides a way to engage tough themes like doubt, failing faith, and a sense disorientation through reflection on your life.

The story that overlays the interactive aspects is my own story of struggle within faith. Over a decade ago, my wife and I moved home to Oklahoma to plant a church with family and friends. We encountered, in the heart of the Bible Belt, a growing number of people giving up on the faith they had known all their life. At one point, it seemed like all my friends were leaving the faith. As I faced tragedy and heartbreak, broken dreams and struggles, I found that my own faith was becoming frail and fragile. In an effort to be open and vulnerable, I shared these struggles with our community. What we then forged together was a safe space to share doubts and search for new language and hope within our shifting faith.

I am not only a pastor, but a small business owner and a graphic designer. I like to consider myself multi-vocational. I teach, I create, I design, I pastor, and I lead. It is from all of these disciplines that I have crafted this book. I look forward to your feedback and deeply appreciate your help already. Thank you for your time and consideration of my proposal.

Peace,  
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[scott@convergenceokc.org](mailto:scott@convergenceokc.org)



## Non-Fiction Book Proposal

**Title:** *Life in Review: An Interactive Guide to Deconstructing Faith toward Hope*

**Author:** Scott Scrivner  
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 Oklahoma City, OK 73107  
 405.255.4405  
[scott@convergenceokc.org](mailto:scott@convergenceokc.org)  
 @sscriv (twitter / instagram)

**Hook:** *Life in Review* invites you to embark on a creative endeavor to rethink and reshape your faith.

**Overview:** *Life in Review* is a work of non-fiction that is part spiritual director, part art experience, and part story. It is full of contemplative practices to help process a faith full of doubts, struggles, and uncertainty. The book has photography, my own original art/graphic design, and other art from artists whom I follow and respect. Using the arts, contemplative prayer practices, and interaction, I am sharing ways to engage and reflect on one's own life and faith. The book invites readers to reflect on and write their own story within the interactive pages. *Life in Review* guides readers to not only reflect on their life, but to also deconstruct or reshape their faith, in order to rediscover the hope of Christ, who encounters the dark nights, the liminal space, the silence, along with us.

**Purpose:**

- To share the author's story with those struggling to hang on to faith—to tell them that they are not alone and they do not have to walk away from it all.
- To provide robust language for a faith that seems to be failing.
- To introduce contemplative prayer practices and inspire reflection on and engagement of everyday ordinary life.
- To reframe deconstruction philosophy into the context of Christ-following.
- To refresh imagination and embracing of mystery through the arts.

**Promotion & Marketing:**

This book has a broad appeal in light of the many who are exiting the church and faith at present. The mass exodus from faith does not mean that people are not concerned about their spiritual life, but they are no longer interested in a version of faith that does not resonate with them. This book addresses the disconnect of faith and authenticity; faith and vulnerability; faith and creativity.

Who cannot benefit from being encouraged to reassess life? to listen more closely to their life? to be even more engaged in the ordinary nature of the everyday? This book encourages these things, but also interacts with the reader to actually engage their life.

Of course, social media will be the location of my personal promotion. I am also an artist and graphic designer, and plan to pair this book with an interactive art show along with art throughout the book.

Instagram: @sscriv

Twitter: @sscriv

[convergenceokc.org](http://convergenceokc.org) • [craftedbyclover.com](http://craftedbyclover.com) • [lqdmmedia.com](http://lqdmmedia.com)

### **Competition:**

- *The Idolatry of God* by Peter Rollins, Howard Books, 2013.
- *The Naked Now: Learning to See as the Mystics See* by Richard Rohr, The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2009.
- *Faith Shift: Finding Your Way Forward When Everything You Believe Is Coming Apart* by Kathy Escobar, Convergent, 2014.
- *From Stone to Living Word: Letting the Bible Live Again* by Debbie Blue, Brazos Press, 2008.

### **Uniqueness:**

While nothing is wholly original, the blend of the arts, contemplative practices, and story uniquely invites the reader to participate in their own faith deconstruction. While you will be able to simply read the book, there will be an added dimension of interactivity and engagement. I want to provide the same grace and deep-breath-refreshment that other authors have given me through my unique story and unique style.

No one else has my story—and yet so many struggle in the same ways. I would like to be a voice that can echo the love of Christ and contribute to the space being made that gives freedom to those who need to face their doubts and faith that seems to be falling apart.

### **Book Format / Non-Fiction:**

The book is laid out in overarching themes that address deconstruction in different aspects of faith. Within each section there is story, art, photography, and interactive practices. The book is designed to be full color, 8x10, with matte finished pages. The format is a mixture of coffee table book, journal, and thoughtful reflections.

### **Chapter Outline:**

#### **DECONSTRUCTING . . . A STARTING POINT**

*Life in Review* comes from an annual practice in our community to reflect on our past year at the start of the new year. We call it “My Year in Review,” and it is an evening of contemplation and art stations where individuals consider their life as it unfolded the previous year. The introduction is story and art that sets the tone of the rest of the book.

### **Sand Castles and Never Ending Tides: A Tale of Deconstruction**

A metaphor born out of many summer family trips to the beach. Building sand castles is a lot like deconstructing faith. We build with the tide in mind, knowing that our faith will continually be reshaped in light of our experience of life.

### **My Pilgrimage: A Story of Expanding Horizons**

The short telling of my own expanding view of God. Throughout my life I have viewed limited aspects of God. Life is a pilgrimage through our limited lens, with an ever-expansive God who far exceeds our view of Him.

### **My Deconstructing Faith & Disorienting Community**

A sense of vertigo began this entire journey into rethinking my faith. Along the way I have experienced some devastating loss and some beautiful hope.

### **Why Life in Review? How to Use this Guide**

A reason for the title and an explanation of how to work through this “interactive guide.” It is not meant to be a passive experience, but one that engages the questions, concerns, tensions, and doubts that may be present in your faith.

## **DECONSTRUCTING . . . OUR LIFE WITHIN**

We live vastly unaware, asleep at the wheel of life. This section defines contemplative prayer by offering practices that explore honest and vulnerable prayer.

### **Why We Are Contemplative**

The brief story of what contemplative prayer has meant to me and our community of faith.

### **Centering Prayer**

The ancient practice of silence.

### **Headspace**

My original art and a story as to how it came about.

### **What Shimmers?**

Considering what it means to move from what you know about God to what resonates deeply as you are with God.

### **Lectio Divina**

A description of the practice of Lectio Divina.

### **Know Thyself**

Finding God and knowing self is a reciprocating journey.

**Threats**

What threatens your heart? What fears dog your every step? What has anger done to your life? All these things are considered through original art and the creation of art through doodles and sketches.

**DECONSTRUCTING . . . IN-BETWEEN-NESS**

We make space to breathe, space to dream, and space to reflect. But we also find a sense in-between-ness or liminal space, as the contemplatives describe it, when we feel uncertain about life. Rather than run from such a space, we are invited to reimagine this as a space for transformation.

**Liminal Space**

**A description of the in-between-ness many of us feel in our life of faith.**

**Not Where but How**

A poem I wrote for our reflection on being in a space that feels—in between.

**Maps and Measures**

An honest telling of my own struggle with the broken idea of God's Will. A practice to reframe what really matters in life.

**Dreams and Dinner Parties: A Deconstruction Story**

A look at Peter's dream that prompted a profound shift in his understanding of God.

**DECONSTRUCTING . . . THE EVERYDAY**

We need a faith that is not full of religious lingo and irrelevant church activities. We need a faith that is sustained by God in our everyday ordinary existence. The following practices all help guide the reader to identify specific bents they have toward seeing God in everyday life. Some find so much resonance in nature, or art; while others see God in the rituals of the church; still others brush against the Divine when caring for their city; and others experience God in hosting a party or sharing a meal. None of these things are ordinary, and yet they are experiences we gravitate to for life. God is present in such experiences—sometimes we just need eyes to see, and ears to hear.

**Finding God in Beauty**

Identifying the way creation, the arts, and creativity resonates with us.

**Finding God in Devotion**

Identifying the way rituals and rhythms in religion speak to us.

**Finding God in the City**

Identifying the way in which neighborhood involvement, local concerns, and care for the under-resourced leads you to passionately engage your home.

**Finding God at the Table**

Identifying the way hosting, feeding, or being social connects with you.

**What Do We Do Now**

In light of the area(s) that most deeply resonated, how does that shape the way you view the Divine in the ordinary everyday of life.

**DECONSTRUCTING . . . SHARED LIFE**

Shared Life is a theme that deconstructs our expectations of the perfect church or faith community. It is a reflection on what it means to live within the reality that forgiveness and bearing burdens assumes that life with others will be imperfect and a struggle at times.

**Community**

Considering the way community deconstructs faith, together.

**Picket Signs and Picket Fences**

A practice to remind us that relationships are more important than the soap boxes that often isolate others.

**Tearing and Mending**

A reflection on the brokenness and beauty of community life.

**I Do & I Don't**

My story of struggle with the implications of a community that loves one another.

**DECONSTRUCTING . . . OUR WORDS**

Each of the practices and prayers in this section are about reshaping our language for faith. Words matter—and when labels and descriptions have lost their meaning, it is time to re-evaluate the way we speak about life with God. This process, however, results in more than changing our terminology—it is about taking on a more authentic faith.

**Finding Language**

My journey of seeking new language to express my every changing faith.

**Via Negativa**

God is not . . . the language that frees God from our boxes.

**Wolves: The Art of Lament**

Song and art that leads to a more honest voice with God.

**Vantage: Deconstructing from the Place We Stand**

A story about the limitations of our viewpoint of life.

### **Salvator Mundi: Deconstructing Leads to New Metaphors**

Considering the metaphor of the orb—a prayer that makes room for an expanding view of God.

### **Liturgy of Doubt**

Is there any value to doubt? Reconsidering the value of Thomas.

### **The Poet and the Song**

Connect with the art of poetry. The lyric and the poem can be such beautiful and vulnerable expressions of what is going on in our lives.

### **Falling Apart: A Natural Cycle of Deconstruction**

The book of Psalms offers a full range of expressions that we can adopt to voice our own failing faith.

### **My God?!**

“My heart melts like wax,” sings David. Have we ever been this honest with God?

### **Our Songs of Deconstruction**

Read and reflect on the community psalms that were born out of the same practice within our church life on Lenten Season.

### **Do You Read Good?**

A confession, prayer, and poem to consider God beyond literacy.

### **Reading the Ikon**

Considering the beauty of paradox in our faith.

### **Intended Readers:**

- Those struggling in their Christian faith.
- Those within the Christian faith who may “awaken” to the tensions they have ignored.
- Those considering themselves “outside” the Christian faith but who are looking for a fresh perspective of Christianity.
- Those who consider themselves “Post-Christian” who might find reason to return to faith.

### **Manuscript:**

The manuscript has a projected word count of 50,000 words, and the work will be completed 3 months after signing.

### **Author Bio:**

Scott Scrivner is the pastor of Convergence Community which he and a team started over ten years ago. Scott is also the Art Director and a partner at his new start-up interactive studio, Clover Partners.

Scott is the father of two, Matthew (13 years) and Meredith (9 years). He has been married to Leslie for just over 20 years.

Scott received his Masters of Divinity at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and went on to team up in starting a church in Texas. Prior to seminary, Scott and Leslie spent two years doing mission work in the resort areas of Lake Tahoe and organizing community engagement for churches in Reno, Nevada.

Scott plans to graduate from George Fox Seminary with his Doctor of Ministry in the Spring of 2015.

### **Publishing Credits:**

Previously published works, book contributions, magazine articles & blog activity. Include book/article title, publisher/magazine, and release date.

Producing content for the Convergence Community blog since 2005, [convergenceokc.org](http://convergenceokc.org)  
“Headspace” Art and article published in Ink & Letters (Fall 2015)

### **Future Projects:**

#### **What Will You Carry With You: Invoking New Metaphors for Faith**

An interactive follow-up to Life in Review that invites the reader to discover new or refresh old metaphors of faith.

#### **Live the Tension: Engage in the Wisdom of Solomon**

Deconstructing faith through the voice of the writer of Ecclesiastes.

#### **New Eyes: What Taking A Weekend Away Can Do For Your Faith**

A guidebook for a retreat that centers on silence and many other ancient and new contemplative practices. It is a start to finish guide on a weekend retreat for a few friends or entire group.

## POSTSCRIPT

I sought this program out one summer afternoon while dreaming of taking the steps to write the story of Convergence and my journey of faith. I had thought about getting my doctorate for years, but with pastoring Convergence and working full time in my graphic design job it had always seemed like something I would need to wait on. I cannot remember now if I was having a slow week or what, but for some reason, I felt like I could manage adding a doctorate onto my already over-full plate. While it was taking on so much more into my life, I was drawn to a program led by Dr. Leonard Sweet and the creative pursuit of Semiotics.

To this day, I have not met anyone who has known what the study of semiotics includes. It was in my second year that I learned to respond, “Semiotics is overlapping the disciplines of philosophy, linguistics, and sociology—and our bend is to overlay those with the study of theology.” I think that just about covers it. At least it has been a satisfactory description for those curious about my continued education.

The summer we spent time in Cambridge, I think it all really clicked for me. It had been amazing the first year, but it was really that summer, writing the Integration Essay, when I had a moment where I felt like I needed someone to pinch me. Not only was Cambridge amazing, the community we had built among our cohort, the wisdom of the faculty of George Fox, and the creative guidance of Len were all providing me a fresh energy and hope for my life in ministry. I remember writing my essay as a reflection that included a Mad Men episode I had just watched, a Caravaggio I had stood in front at the National Gallery, a passage of Scripture I had been meditating on, and a heady quote



from Kaku comparing the vastness of the infinite galaxy and the vastness of the infinite inward life. Seriously? Could an education be any more inspiring?

I thank God for the role this DMin has played in my life.

I thank all of you for the role you have let God play in expanding my boundaries, in providing fresh and robust language for faith, and inspiring me to seek out ever-changing metaphors for our beloved faith.

As I alluded to earlier, I came in to the program knowing that I wanted to tell the story of our small but significant community of faith, Convergence. I wanted to be in an environment that would push me to learn and read and process and write like I never had before. I felt like there was so much within me that needed some pushing to get out and process. My story could be summed up by growing up and almost always being the one to count on for a solid, steady, unwavering faith. And yet, in my thirties all of that seemed to change. Tragedies, exposure to life beyond my narrow views, and—honestly—the failure of Convergence to be a sustainable church all broke my faith in ways that I felt like it was falling apart. So many of my friends were leaving the faith. And while I was living out a kind of vertigo, I stayed with it—dragging our community through the process. Three years ago, when I went looking for this program, I was ready to share my experiences. But I was certainly nervous to be vulnerable outside the life of our community. Convergence knew me and we all have had enough shared life that it no longer sounded like heresy to admit doubt and struggle. But how would the cohort respond? Wow, I have never been more inspired or refreshed by a group of pastors. All my fears turned to admiration for each one in our group. While we all did not agree, there

was an admiration, respect, and grace that permeated each chat, each forum, and each advance. I will forever be changed by our cohort.

I have lived my topic over and over again. I knew what I wanted to write about, deconstruction of faith, and that stayed true through the end. With each academic essay, I confirmed over and over that this was my topic. Even now, as I have wrapped up writing, I am still enthusiastic for the research. I cannot help but scan [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) for more reading material to keep going.

The writing of the dissertation has been an exercise in self-awareness. I have been at some of my lowest points and highest points since this past summer. While I felt fully prepared by the amazing faculty and resources available, nothing can fully prepare you for the brutal nature of this process. I was able to use every essay I wrote, and still there was so much work to do. This fall I certainly found myself at the breaking point. Starting a new interactive digital media studio in 2015, continuing to pastor Convergence, and writing my dissertation have proven to be more of a load than I thought I could bear. Here I am at the end, writing the dedication earlier today to my wife and kids, and I cannot believe I have actually made it.

Finally, in the spirit of deconstruction, I know that what I have written in this dissertation and artifact will one day need to be questioned and re-signed for a better way to express faith, but for now, it is exactly what it needs to be. This is my hope and my prayer, that we will always be deconstructing and yet also always be present to see God in this moment.

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## **APPENDIX 01: POST-CHRISTIAN INTERVIEWS**

### **Perspectives from Friends**

My research on deconstructing faith is a personal one. I requested answers from two friends that I would consider Post-Christian. The names have been changed, but their answers are used here with permission.

**Would you consider yourself, at this present moment, estranged from The Church or from the Christian Faith or both—or what words would you use to describe your current relationship to Christianity and The Church?**

**Brian:** I would hesitate to say that I am a Christian in the sense of my current state of faith—especially in relation to how or what I understood this term to mean from my past and the location where I came to age. I would not say that I am estranged from The Church. I don't believe that there is a “A Church” in the spiritual sense and rather feel that I have intentionally moved from a place of exclusion, hypocrisy, intolerance, etc. into a larger, universal community of humanity and the world in general. My relationship to Christianity is largely skeptical or indifferent. I respect the moral ideas and ethical teaching in this religion as I would in others, but based upon my background I am likely even more skeptical of the Christian faith than I am of others.

**Jeremy:** I would consider myself fully estranged from the Christian faith. I prefer to identify as agnostic rather than atheist, but I no longer subscribe to the notion of a personal relationship with a supernatural deity.

**What was the main event or events (that) led up to your leaving The Church? How long ago did these events and your decision to leave occur?**

**Brian:** Main event...Hmm. Long road or chain of events. I have always been a bit startled by the inconsistencies of “Christians”—their professed faith vs. their actions...Mine included...when I considered myself of the community. I don't know if there was any “one” breaking point that led me to move further along in my journey. Definite events that helped me to “move along” include the following: 1. Fundamental Religious Extremism and Intolerance among certain Christian friends. A) This could refer to political, sexual, financial, artistic or other beliefs that are contrary to conservative, evangelical Christianity. B) Friends—as described above is



an important word. I likely would not have cared so much about the opinions of mere acquaintances versus a community of friends/family who had embraced me when I held similar viewpoints, but who were fearful and judgmental of alternative points of view. 2. When the community I was a part of became more concerned with a person's religious creed instead of that person's humanity and goodness. 3. Lack of Education and Fear of asking questions of Faith. I became "aware" of these events in the past 6 to 8 years; however, as I look further into my past, I see these events were very regular and that I tolerated or ignored them versus truly considering the implications.

**Jeremy:** Although I was raised in a Christian home, and was "churched" from birth, the idea of a personal relationship with Christ just never came easily to me. Because of a strong desire to please others (particularly, I think, my parents), I told myself that I just wasn't trying hard enough, praying hard enough, or being a good enough person for the Lord to fully reveal himself to me. So began many years of going through the motions, saying the things I was supposed to say, and doing the things I was supposed to do, even though (even as a kid) I was increasingly miserable and wracked with guilt over my inability to feel Christ working in my life. I married at a young age to a girl I had nothing in common with, wanting desperately to be seen as a "Godly" man and trusting that the marriage covenant would change me unequivocally. Instead, I felt more trapped and more fraudulent with every passing year. I built close and genuine friendships through church, but was always acutely aware that the closest of those friendships were built around common interests that weren't faith-based at all. I prayed, I read my Bible, I went to church, and it all continued to ring hollow. Even as I grew more distant from my wife, we became parents in the unspoken hope that it would renew our marriage and bring a new sense of purpose and responsibility. Instead, I began to look elsewhere for the intellectual and emotional connections I lacked in my marriage—which led to adultery, along with more guilt and more affirmation that praying those desires away—however fervently—was an exercise in futility. Having spent so many years so desperately wanting to please God, to please my parents, and trying to do and say all the right things, I looked in the mirror at 31 and found a complete and utter piece of shit staring back at me. In the end, it was the one New Year's resolution I've ever stuck with that led up to me officially leaving the church for good. As 2007 came to a close, I resolved that I was not going to live another year in an empty marriage to a woman I had no romantic feelings for, nor as someone who claimed to be a believer in something that had done little more than cause guilt and anxiety for so much of my life. My

despair at that point was such that the alternative was just to not go on at all. I was fully prepared to face the reactions of friends and family who would surely be told of the horrible things I'd done, and the ways in which I'd been lying to the people who thought they knew me best. Whatever the consequences were, they were preferable to trying to maintain a crumbling facade.

**What are your current feelings about your past faith and your past involvement in The Church?**

**Brian:** Shame and embarrassment. Not publicly, but personally.

**Jeremy:** I made some good—lifelong, even—friends through church and church activities. I learned a lot about myself, the process of introspection, and the importance of serving others. Unfortunately, I also learned what it feels like to desperately want an intangible thing that so many others claim to possess, and to not be able to make it true in my own life. I continually felt at odds with a subculture that frequently discourages free thought, doubt, dissent, and honesty, and instead espouses conformity, image-at-all-costs, and simpering holier-than-thou mantras like “love the sinner, hate the sin.” I grew to vehemently disagree with the evangelical preoccupation with indoctrinating young children with spiritual concepts they have no real capacity to grasp. I remain disgusted by the anti-intellectual stance of the evangelical church in particular, and the Christian church as a whole. I'll never understand why churches are compelled to exhaust so many resources on “foreign missions” when there are so many needs at home, or so much money on luxurious facilities that seem wholly and blatantly at odds with the teachings of Jesus.

**Is there anything you miss? If so, could you describe at least one in some detail?**

**Brian:** I don't know really...I really do not think so. I am concerned with how to morally and ethically raise my children since I was raised actively participating in religion, but only because I am not closely familiar with alternative “role models” that have walked a path similar to where I currently am. But...then again, I am not sure how much the church actually instilled in me regarding ethics and morality versus the example and direction of my parents.

**Jeremy:** I miss the friendships that were so easy to maintain when we were guaranteed to meet at least once, if not several times, in the course of a week. To not attend church as a family in the Bible Belt is an exercise in

isolation. So, so many other families in our age bracket are involved in church activities, which tends to leave folks like us out in the cold. My wife and I have often discussed the prospect of attending a church again just for the social aspect, but are unwilling to fake belief for the sake of meeting new people. We've also considered attending an alternative congregation like the UU church, but have found it difficult to relate to the New-Age (and frankly just weird) attitudes of so many of the folks who are involved in those sorts of gatherings. And so our circle of close friends is pretty small.

**Do you feel your mental, emotional, physical, spiritual, and overall health has been affected by your decision to distance from faith and/or church? Explain in some detail?**

**Brian:** Yes. Absolutely. Let me clarify. I believe that I have truly moved away from the Church; however, I am unclear that it would be fair to say that I have moved from faith. I just do not consider my “faith” to have any relevant tie to Christianity. Further I am actually offended that “faith” is even linked to religious beliefs, especially Christianity. Next—I believe that this journey has been similar to my own personal “dark night of the soul.” I have had to toil, and still do in some cases, through challenges to my health (mental, emotional, physical, spiritual—overall) by walking this path. This has served to further my concern regarding religion (as I grew to understand it) connection whatsoever. It frightens me when I consider how difficult it is to leave the faith and the toll it takes on an individual's overall health. The energy spent keeping my life together after such a long time in the community—took a considerable toll on my life—taking so much time, health, and happiness away. Days that could have been spent loving and/or serving others or just enjoying the gift of life that I have been given.

**Jeremy:** Absolutely. The last seven years have been—without a doubt—the best in memory. Once I learned to love a self that was willing to admit an absence of faith in the supernatural, the guilt, the shame, and the doubt began to fall away. There was no longer the prospect of an angry God to strike me down with a lightning bolt, or to demand forgiveness and repentance for sympathizing with people and causes that run counter to the Southern Baptist Convention. I was able to freely admit to myself that renouncing my so-called faith had no bearing on my capacity for love or morality. Seven years on, I'm in a fulfilling marriage relationship with a woman I love deeply, raising two children who will be taught to initiate their own search for meaning and truth—instead of being told what they should believe—when it comes to faith. I still love and maintain

friendships with many people who profess Christ; I fully recognize that because it never rang true for me doesn't mean that it doesn't feel like truth to someone else. It's funny. When I first discussed my loss of faith with my father, the first thing he asked me was how I found the hope to get out of bed every day without belief in eternal life. My reply to that line of questioning is simple—I don't need the false promise of heaven and eternity to live out an authentic, fulfilling life in the years I have left. If I can work to make the world even a little bit better for the ones who come after me, if the people I love remember me fondly when I'm gone, and if my children pass along the good things they learned from me, then that's all the hope I need.

**In your own words, what does it mean to LOVE ONE ANOTHER?**

**Brian:** Just what it says...Love One Another. Keep it simple and do to others as we would have them or like them to do to us. Any other explanation or rambling about the term seems to me to be a waste of time....

**Jeremy:** To love one another means to not only treat others as you'd want to be treated, but to put others' needs ahead of your own—to treat them BETTER than you'd expect to be treated. To listen to what they have to say even when you disagree, and to not be compelled to try and change their mind. To accept each other as we are, without some preconceived expectation of conformity, and to value those who cause you to question the ideas you formerly held as truth.

It was hard to read some of the answers from my friends, if I am being honest. Of course, I wish that their story would have been that the Church came through for them, that Christ-following, as they understood it, was compelling enough for them to stay connected. And yet, for a whole host of complexities, their pilgrimages are different. But it is for their stories, and for so many others, that I hope for a new day within my faith, and my community of faith. My hope is found in our coming to the edge and having no idea what the next step will be. I find hope in the description of Christian Piatt of the Christian faith, “[it is] on the verge of something new and uncertain.” Attitudes toward organized religion are rapidly changing in Western culture. Church attendance is in sharp

decline across the board for nearly all Protestant denominations, as well as for the Catholic Church. People are walking away from Christianity in record numbers, and those who are sticking around are reframing the story in ways that don't seem to fit the old formulas.<sup>1</sup>

I cannot help but imagine how my friends' stories might have changed (or might change one day) in light of a faith that can be let go of, deconstructed, and renewed. Would the atrocities be lessened? Would the accusations be quieted? Would the emptiness be filled? Would the language be rethought? the metaphors re-signed? the staleness refreshed? I am not referring to finding a different faith but a renewed one. I am not suggesting a different Christ, but less of one in our own making.

## APPENDIX 02: POST-POSTMODERNISM

### Integral World Defined

Considering the postmodern world we live in is important, and this is why so much time has been devoted to it here. However, it is also vital to acknowledge that the *post-postmodernism* or *Integral* world is already here and going to be around for the foreseeable future. Much of the work I have done as a pastor with Convergence and shaping my own life with Christ has been in light of a postmodern perspective. However, the Integral World adds to postmodernism or evolves and progresses upon what has already been laid out here in the Post- section.

Ken Wilber, Jean Gesper, and Andrew Cohen have all been associated with this emerging worldview. I first became familiar with Wilber's work through a mentor, Ron Martoia, as Convergence Community searched for authentic language to describe the nuances of our changing and shared faith. A quick exploration and summary of the influences on Christianity as many know it today includes modernism, postmodernism, and in the future, it will be the post-postmodern world. Modernism or the Enlightenment can be defined by its center around rationality and the scientific method. Modernism tasked us with finding the view. Truth was absolute and objective. In postmodernity, pluralism can be found at its center. Postmodernism invited us to see things from the perspective of the other, acknowledging that ours is not the only vantage point—validating an a-perspectival view.

### A Beautiful Setting for the Church

An Integral view takes the rationality of modernism and the postmodern pluralism/egalitarianism and brings them together with an overarching spirituality.<sup>94</sup> The progression that makes the Integral World may even be better stated as a movement from an individual's egocentricity to an eventual cosmic-centric worldview. One is integrated into the whole.

Postmodern thinking concludes that it is a person's prerogative to have spiritual beliefs if they choose to. But Integral thinking concludes that spirituality is essential to a healthy humanity and the earth, and that the incorporation of trans-perspectival and trans-disciplinary thought is essential to being fully human . . . It is the integration of modern rationalism with postmodern pluralism with an emphasis on spirituality and syncretism.<sup>95</sup>

This added emphasis on the whole, upon being fully human, upon a less compartmentalized more integrated life, offers an incredibly poignant moment for Christ-following to be expressed. Rather than being threatened by yet another evolution of cultural worldview, can there be a new hope discovered within this Integral view that can resonate with the Church?

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<sup>94</sup> Daniel Fusco, *Ahead of the Curve: Preparing the Church for Post-Postmodernism* (Mustang, OK: Tate Publishing, 2010), 44.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

### APPENDIX 03: ECCLESIASTES AND THE VALUE OF PROCESS

#### *Premature Conclusions*

There is a modern way of understanding knowledge that looks like a list of beliefs, ascent of truths. We find certainty in saying something. Being final. We find certainty in statements and language. We find certainty in writing the words, saying the words, affirming the words. We find comfort in such certainty.<sup>96</sup>

Why do we find so much comfort in finalizing, in nailing down, or in concluding?

The book of Ecclesiastes exposes our comfort in certainty and the vitality of process. The writer of Ecclesiastes, referred to as Qoheleth, the pseudonym for the author meaning “gatherer” or often translated “preacher,” will mock our conclusions at times, as short-sighted, calling for an appreciation for the process of living. For it is within process that our lives are shaped. The Truth of Christ is the truth that shapes us. It is a relational Truth, not a static, nail-it-down kind of truth.<sup>97</sup>

Postmodernism is suspect of knowledge, not only because it reacts against the certainty modernism props up through statements, theories, beliefs, and definitions, but also because knowledge is seen as a modern power-play. Knowledge makes for *in* and *out* categories. One is either in the club, having certain knowledge, or outside the club, not yet arriving to such knowledge. Postmodern deconstructs such modern ideas of knowledge.

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<sup>96</sup> James P. Danaher, *Eyes That See, Ears That Hear: Perceiving Jesus in a Postmodern Context* (Liguori, MO: Liguori/Triumph, 2006), Kindle 433.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 506.



While I find myself much more akin to the postmodern view—I do react strongly against the modern view<sup>98</sup>—I find it tempting to be comfortable within the postmodern view of the world. However, neither the modern or postmodern lens is fully flawed or fully accurate. The postmodern view does not go far enough. One can deconstruct what is, but then what? We must learn how to live within an ongoing process.

Many of my former belief systems have failed me. I understand and sympathize with those who are leaving and turning to atheism and agnosticism. I also understand the longing of those who want something to grasp—an anchor—a timelessness. Things seemed more simple, more graspable in the days I claimed belief statements and stakes in the ground for my faith.

*Why not leave my faith?*

*Why not return to the same faith I began with?*

*Why not be definitive and conclude one way or the other?*

It seems that so many things in Christianity have been reduced to an either/or equation. Tomlinson writes, in his book *Post-Evangelical*, “I believe the lack of ready alternatives is a major source of people giving up the quest altogether, and consequently becoming ex-Christians rather than post-evangelicals.”<sup>99</sup> The Story of God has been reduced to so many black and white decisions that there is no room for relationship, no room for process. But I have hope that re-discovering a fringe book in Scripture may provide the very voice that gives us hope in moving forward, without abandoning the faith or returning to a version of faith that has failed us. It is Ecclesiastes that I can turn to and find the value of process over conclusion.

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>99</sup> Tomlinson, *The Post-Evangelical*, Kindle 146.

Ecclesiastes . . . confront[s] us with the language of questions—and many without answers . . . Many of us have little capacity to go a day with unanswered questions. The spokesman for God calls us into the discomfort and wants us to see that God is there.<sup>100</sup>

It is in this kind of up-in-the-air and uncomfortable state that we can discover not a reinforcement of what we once believed so securely or a destruction of faith entirely. In Ecclesiastes we can deconstruct what we have and move to a faith that is more hopeful, more relational, and more honest. The philosophy and poetry of Ecclesiastes holds up a mirror, bidding one to no longer avoid life, but to reflect upon it—to consider the depths of what is going on inside and all around one's surrounding world. Ecclesiastes sets a tone of observation and awareness that the Church often chooses to ignore or sugar-coat. The value of Ecclesiastes is its mirror-like presence for all who are willing to encounter and face real life.

### *The Polyphony of Ecclesiastes*

Space will not permit me to go verse by verse through the book of Ecclesiastes. However, an overview of the theme and voice of Ecclesiastes will be sufficient to encourage valuing process over conclusion—being present rather than concerned only with destination.

Ecclesiastes is a book unlike any other in the Scriptures. So much so, it found a very mixed reception even in the days the canon was being formed.<sup>101</sup> Contradictions, hopelessness, and assaults on Israel's common wisdom made it a book of much debate

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<sup>100</sup> Zack Eswine, *Recovering Eden: The Gospel According to Ecclesiastes* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2014), Kindle 27.

<sup>101</sup> Amy Plantinga Pauw, *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes: A Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Westminster, UK: John Knox, 2015), Kindle 140.

between rabbis deciding the final status of what we know as the Scriptures. However, the final decision was made due to the way the Ecclesiastes is bookended by the words of the Torah. It begins with the reference to Solomon. “These are the words of the teacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem”<sup>102</sup> and it ends with a more orthodox summary: “The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God, and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone.”<sup>103</sup>

Ecclesiastes is mostly a reflection of one’s own life. Over the span of life, reality sets in to the fleeting and smoke like quality of a lifetime. Pushback on the message of Ecclesiastes exists because it exposes people to doubt and fear and despair. No one enjoys such transparency. Ecclesiastes offers a mirror and a voice that speaks both hope and despair. The writing of Ecclesiastes asks us to live in the tension between these things. After all, “Qoheleth is not so much contradicting himself as observing the contradictions in the world.”<sup>104</sup> When we include Ecclesiastes in the entire Story of God we then have language for the shadows, the dark places, the doubts, and the questions.

Without Ecclesiastes the Scriptures would be missing an important discordant voice, writes Peter Enns.

Polyphony is certainly an important point to consider with respect to Ecclesiastes as countervoice . . . Qoheleth’s words do not simply contribute a particularly discordant voice to Scripture’s ultimately harmonious polyphony. He does not seek to add a dissonant note to a complex chord, thus producing an unexpected and richer harmony. His presentation of God, which is his considered and final opinion on the matter, calls into question the very notion of harmony. He neutralizes rather than adds to Scripture’s polyphonic harmony. He does not wish

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<sup>102</sup> Ecclesiastes 1:1 The Voice.

<sup>103</sup> Ecclesiastes 12:13 NRSV.

<sup>104</sup> Amy Plantinga Pauw, *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes: A Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Westminster, UK: John Knox, 2015), Kindle 140.

to be in conversation with other voices; he wishes to overtake them, to silence them. Synthesizing Qoheleth and other voices is not just difficult—Qoheleth would consider it foolishness.<sup>105</sup>

So Ecclesiastes is the voice of dissonance because life is not always harmonious, but polyphonic. It seems that in the life and words of Qoheleth that we can find comfort when life does not meet the expectations we have created for it. “We should study Ecclesiastes because it is honest about the troubles of life—so honest that the great American novelist Herman Melville once called it ‘the truest of all books.’”<sup>106</sup>

Ecclesiastes gives us an outlet for honesty, skepticism, and truth about our life. Because we are people with a lens through which we see life, we have a limited viewpoint. To ignore this and interpret life “above the sun” seems out of step with even the way in which we can walk with God. “The reality is that the truth, insofar as human beings have access to it, is always perspectival. For us to desire a certain, objective reality is to wish to have access to the truth as God alone has access to it.”<sup>107</sup> And, furthermore, to conclude and finalize our perspective is to miss out on the process of growth and transformation. In our limitations, we process rather than arrive.

### *The Smoke of Ecclesiastes*

Smoke, nothing but smoke.  
There’s nothing to anything—it’s all smoke.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Philip Graham Ryken and R. Kent Hughes, *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2010), Kindle 203.

<sup>107</sup> James P. Danaher, *Eyes That See, Ears That Hear: Perceiving Jesus in a Postmodern Context* (Liguori, MO: Liguori/Triumph, 2006), Kindle 481.

<sup>108</sup> Ecclesiastes 1:2 MSG.

*Hebel* is the Hebrew word that defines the message of Ecclesiastes. It can be translated “vapor” or “smoke,” but to stop there would not reveal the breadth of meaning of the word.

When we look at the way this word is used throughout the book, however, it takes on broader significance. The word *hebel* comes to express the absurdity and futility of life in a fallen world . . . “vanity of vanities.” To use the word “vanity” like this is to say that our brief lives are marked by empty futility . . .<sup>109</sup>

I gravitate to the language of smoke and absurdity. Smoke is supremely ungraspable and yet it is something we see. Smoke comes with qualities that can be sensory and yet it is fleeting and not fully knowable. Smoke is changing and not consistent in form. Each of these descriptions are like the faith I am now finding. The use of absurdity for *hebel* is appealing as well. While it may sound too light, maybe even funny, it speaks to the overwhelming nature of our faith. To say something is absurd is also to speak of its relationality. “The quality of absurdity is not inherent in a phenomenon but is a relational concept, residing in the tension between a certain reality and a framework of expectations.”<sup>110</sup>

### *Ecclesiastes Makes Space for Liminality*

The beginning of wisdom  
was when I learnt the difference  
between believing in the truth  
and telling the truth  
about  
belief.

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<sup>109</sup> Philip Graham Ryken and R. Kent Hughes, *Ecclesiastes Why Everything Matters* (Wheaton, IL.: Crossway Books, 2010), Kindle 132.

<sup>110</sup> Michael V. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1999), 31.

- Padraig Ó Tauma<sup>111</sup>

Life is fleeting, like a passing mist.  
It is like trying to catch hold of a breath;  
All vanishes like a vapor; everything is a great vanity.

- Qoheleth<sup>112</sup>

My favorite metaphor for Ecclesiastes comes from Jeffrey Meyers' commentary on Ecclesiastes, called *A Table in the Mist*.<sup>113</sup> The table is an image of hospitality, shared life, beauty of both food and drink and community. The table is also an image for communion; Christ's Body broken, His Blood poured out. This is what it means to not conclude or arrive—but to process. To sit at the table in the midst of the mist, the smoke, the vapor of life. To find meaning in life together with others, with Christ, and with our true self.

Meaningless, everything is meaningless. This is how we begin. Everything? Really? Even the really important stuff? The book concludes with the same: vapor, smoke, absurdity, meaningless. However, one more thing is added—"Fear God and keep His commandments"—as if to say keep moving forward, stay in relationship, let life play out. Seek out relationship throughout all the smoke, all the vapor, all the struggle, all the beauty, all the pleasure. Keep your eyes open, keep your mind awake, open your arms wide; there is so much to experience that you will long for and that you will resist. You will face great beauty and great horror. In light of the space Ecclesiastes makes for in-between-ness, I simply pray,

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<sup>111</sup> Padraig Ó Tuama, *Readings from the Book of Exile* (London, UK: Canterbury Press, 2012), 26.

<sup>112</sup> Ecclesiastes 1:2 The Voice.

<sup>113</sup> Jeffrey Meyers, *Ecclesiastes Through New Eyes: A Table in the Mist* (Monroe, LA: Athanasius, 2006), Kindle 1.

*Do not become stone.  
Do not nail down your position.  
Let it flow.  
Let it pour out.  
Let the nearness be your way.*

*Ecclesiastes Deconstructs*

[Ecclesiastes] has indeed the smell of the tomb about it.  
- H. W. Robinson<sup>114</sup>

Qoheleth ushers us into the morgue which holds our old faith, our deteriorating worldview. So much of theology and modern church life has devoted itself to solving problems, answering questions, and furthering our bent toward certainty. Over the years, the tidiest of beliefs have been the first to fall prey to the incongruence of life experience. Those beliefs that narrow and oversimplify life are the ones that wilt and die off. Christ following does not offer the inside track for the answers to all things. “The gift of biblical wisdom, in other words, is not all about getting a privileged seat in God’s traffic control tower of the world. We don’t get to understand why things happen the way they do. We are mistaken if we think wisdom gives us that sort of insight.”<sup>115</sup>

Ecclesiastes helps us deconstruct the patterns of our world that reduce our lives to our usefulness and our production. It is the Scriptures that help guide us into making our lives more than the reduction we are often given by society and even, unfortunately, the church. Lauren Winner, in her book *Still: Notes on a Mid-Faith Crisis*, writes, “My friend Ruth’s mother once told her, ‘Every ten years you have to remake everything.’ Reshape

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<sup>114</sup> James Limburg, *Encountering Ecclesiastes: A Book for Our Time* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2006), 4.

<sup>115</sup> James Limburg, *Encountering Ecclesiastes: A Book for Our Time* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2006), 169.

yourself. Reorient yourself. Remake everything.”<sup>116</sup> Whether it is a certain amount of time or not is not that important. However, the sentiment is vital. Priorities move, experiences shape, desire drifts, all in such a way that causes one to reprocess life as it is. No matter how drastic or subtle, reorienting one’s life is a deconstructive process.

### *The God of Ecclesiastes*

God intends to reveal himself as the One Who Goes There.

- Lauren Winner<sup>117</sup>

Winner’s words are a comfort for those who see God less as the one to keep life tidy and fixed, and more the One who stands beside in the journey of life. However, many have yet to find a version of faith that is about the presence or with-ness of God. Faith, for many, feeds the need to wrap up, nail down, and conclude. In a climate of Christianity that is more about solid ground and certainty, the wisdom of Ecclesiastes sounds like a contradiction to these values.

But because of the safe, clean-cut, pristine, sentimental, or naive approaches to Christianity and church that have mentored many of us, we may cherish a mistaken notion that God resembles a more G-rated approach to life. Ecclesiastes reminds us, however, that wherever there is, whatever the conversation, whatever the question or unsettling situation, God is able and willing to go there. There is a kind of authenticity that God is willing to set before us in the book that would make many of us who pride ourselves on transparency clam up.<sup>118</sup>

A G-rated approach to life is not just free of the messy and unsacred and replaced with the clean and undefiled. A G rating is given to stories that have easily identified the

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<sup>116</sup> Lauren F. Winner, *Still: Notes on a Mid-Faith Crisis* (New York: HarperOne, 2012), 31-32.

<sup>117</sup> Zack Eswine, *Recovering Eden: The Gospel According to Ecclesiastes* (Phillipsburg, IL: P & R, 2014), Kindle 39.

<sup>118</sup> Zack Eswine, *Recovering Eden: The Gospel According to Ecclesiastes* (Phillipsburg, IL: P & R, 2014), Kindle 37.



good and bad and encourage black-and-white thinking and formulaic stories ( $A + B = C$ ). It is consistency and certainty that exist in a G-rated world. Yet the world in which one's faith must exist is anything but this simplistic picture of life. It is the story of Ecclesiastes that sheds light—and darkness—on our story. It is the reader of Ecclesiastes who will be challenged to face the smoke, the absurd, the vapor, and say, *Everything does matter*.

The final message of Ecclesiastes is not that nothing matters but that everything does. What we did, how we did it, and why we did it will all have eternal significance. The reason everything matters is because everything in the universe is subject to the final verdict of a righteous God who knows every secret.<sup>119</sup>

If everything matters, one needs eyes to see this. Awareness of the connectedness, the beauty, and the presence within the present are effects of deconstruction. One's faith is disoriented when the lives of others are cheapened through theological stances and platitudes. One's faith undergoes a sense of vertigo when this present moment is overshadowed by a sole focus on eternal life. One's faith turns upside down when there have been no experience of inward reflection. A disoriented faith cries out for meaning, and contemplative prayer echoes back, *meaning is everywhere*.

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<sup>119</sup> Philip Graham Ryken and R. Kent Hughes, *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2010), Kindle 5532.

## APPENDIX 04: FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS ON NEO-FUNDAMENTALISM

### *Results of Neo-Fundamentalism*

A solution that ushers people out of the disorientation they feel may seem like the answer. Yes, Fundamentalism or Neo-Fundamentalism faces the disorientation with a solution. It offers to dismiss and replace it. This, to me, is far more insidious than letting the disorientation play out in a safe and open community. The Neo-Fundamentalist solution, while instilling confidence and certainty, leads us away from love and grace toward a rigid and separatist elitism. McKnight shares where this movement is headed:

What I can't understand is why people want to go there: its history is predictable. Though I'm no prophet, this is what I think might occur: It will become insular and separatistic, it will become divisive and accusatory from within, it will lack grace, it will create Christians who are not free in the Spirit but who will be rigid and intolerant, it will become socially withdrawn, it will lose a prophetic voice because it will lose contact with culture, it will attract angry, defensive, and mean-spirited individuals... I could go on.<sup>120</sup>

"Are we the last remaining non-Neo-Fundamentalist church planters in OKC?" I asked the pastor friend across from me. We had run into each other with a similar routine of dropping in to a local coffee roaster. We named some of the church plants that we had known of over the past ten years and we came up with all of them having some kind of tie to a national, heavily Neo-Fundamentalist movement. It seems that if any version of Christianity is gaining traction in our city it is within this movement.

It concerns me when the driving solution to disorientation of faith within such a movement is to push toward a greater certainty, a narrowing of scope, and an insulation

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<sup>120</sup> Scot McKnight, "The Rise of Neo-Fundamentalism," Jesus Creed blog, August 25, 2006, accessed September 15, 2015, <http://www.patheos.com/community/jesuscreed/2006/08/25/the-rise-of-neo-fundamentalism/>

that frames everything within an in/out, either/or, paradigm. Downing writes about what she calls the Fundamentalist Fallacy as “instantiated when one assumes that his/her own philosophy is the only valid philosophy ... (and demands a universal agreement on such a statement).”<sup>121</sup>

### *What Certainty Cannot Accomplish*

Control. Certainty. Confidence. These are the combatants of disorientation and liminal space, or in-between-ness. And yet, certainty and control cannot be exchanged for faith. Paul writes, “Faith is the assurance of things you have hoped for, the absolute conviction that there are realities you’ve never seen” (Hebrews 11:1, *The Voice*). Faith is not the guarantee of what we think; because we view life through a limited lens. Our vantage point is not flawless. Paul explains, “For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known” (1 Corinthians 13:12, King James Version). The problem with certainty is that we elevate what we want to happen, when it does happen, as evidence that God is at work. We might even begin to replace the idea of God with life going our way. Faith is a bridge for a relationship with God, not a mechanism to controlling God to bend life into what we are confident in.

“When the nature and limitations of faith are forgotten Christianity easily becomes an irrational and dogmatic creed claiming absolute truth for itself and engaging in a power drive to suppress or destroy all alternative points of view and those who hold

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<sup>121</sup> Crystal L. Downing, *Changing Signs of Truth: A Christian Introduction to the Semiotics of Communication* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), Kindle, 500.

them.”<sup>122</sup> As much as we may desire the solid ground of certainty to overcome our disorientation, it does little to lead us into a faith that reflects Christ’s own journey. Certainty cannot lead us to grow in love, compassion, and a simple/complex faith.<sup>123</sup>

It is through postmodern eyes that we can see a Christianity that goes further than an embrace of certainty and beyond even a mere critique of certainty. We can have an entirely different paradigm, one that makes room for knowledge and truth without the trappings of certainty or objectivity. Arguing for a form he calls Radical Orthodoxy, James K. Smith writes,

[We seek] to reanimate the account of knowledge offered by Augustine and Aquinas. On this ancient-medieval-properly-postmodern model, we rightly give up pretensions to absolute knowledge or certainty, but we do not thereby give up on knowledge altogether. Rather, we can properly confess that we know God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, but such knowledge rests on the gift of revelation, is not universally objective or demonstrable, and remains a matter of interpretation and perspective (with significant appreciation for the role of the Spirit’s regeneration and illumination as a condition for knowledge). We confess knowledge without certainty, truth without objectivity.<sup>124</sup>

We have a finitude that has never been okay through the lens of modernism. Human achievement seeking to overcome subjectivity and flaw is a hallmark of the Enlightenment. But it is with our current age that we find freedom to live within the tension of finitude and the infinite. Derrida and other deconstructionists often do not go far enough. Theirs is a religion without religion. James K. Smith offers a critique of this

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<sup>122</sup> Jeremy Young, *The Cost of Certainty* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 2006), 6.

<sup>123</sup> Crystal L. Downing, *Changing Signs of Truth: A Christian Introduction to the Semiotics of Communication* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 500, Kindle.

“Fundamentalist Fallacy... instantiated when one assumes that his/her own philosophy is the only valid philosophy ... (and demands a universal agreement on such a statement).”

<sup>124</sup> James K.A. Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism? Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 121.

postmodern view of “religion without religion” as being a continuation of the categorical compartmentalization that is offered in the Cartesian Paradigm. To refer to the Cartesian Paradigm is to reference the way in which modernism divides and oversimplifies which in turn disregards a more connected and holistic influence.<sup>125</sup> The “religion without religion” perspective oversimplifies in its idea that dogma or discipline eventually leads to violence. It goes on to assert that one should adopt or “reduce faith to a generic affirmation of love or justice.”<sup>126</sup> This, says Smith, is a very un-incarnational view. He presses that a more fully postmodern view is not to return to the compartmentalization within the Cartesian paradigm, but to be free of it completely and live within the particularity that is offered in the Gospel.

Christian confession begins from the scandalous reality that God became flesh, and became flesh in a particular person, at a particular time, and in a particular place. The affirmation of particularity is at the very heart of the incarnation, which is itself a reaffirmation of the goodness of particularity affirmed at creation. This affirmation of particularity is then extended in and by the body of Christ, which is the church. But such an incarnational affirmation of embodiment and particularity—including the particularities of dogmatic confession, institutional organization, historical unfolding of doctrine, and so on—is more properly postmodern than the lingering modernism of a religion without religion that, in Kantian fashion, reduces faith to a generic affirmation of love or justice. A more persistent postmodernism embraces the incarnational scandal of determinate confession and its institutions: dogmatic theology and a confessionally governed church.<sup>127</sup>

Postmodernism encourages the very localization and particularization that is found within a life with Christ. Beyond the certainty and control obsessed faith can be found a more

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<sup>125</sup> “The Cartesian Paradigm,” accessed November 1, 2015, <http://www.rudi.net/books/1900>

<sup>126</sup> James K.A. Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism? Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 122.

<sup>127</sup> James K.A. Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism? Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 122.

grassroots, authentic, and local expression. Smith is saying that there is an alternative to such a modern influenced version of faith.

### *Endless Effects of Experience*

Truth is felt to be more complex and not nearly as dogmatic and certain. The clear-cut categories of previous stages give way to a multidimensionality and a realization that our previous certainty was simply assumed and yet was the result of only one vantage point. When the perspective changes, how we view everything in the world around us changes too. We therefore have to approach truth from multiple perspectives simultaneously if we want the full story.<sup>128</sup>

Our experience of life has a deep effect on our faith. Some would say that experience should be detached from faith, that the way our life unfolds should not affect the foundation, the solid rock, of our faith. And yet to detach faith and experience is to create a robotic faith that stands in the midst of a vacuum. Faith that is not paired with experience is idyllic at best and, at worst, simply impossible. Yes, experience is subjective and can even be deluded or deranged. And yet, is our attempt to isolate experience and faith under the same threat of delusion and derangement? We are human. We filter life and faith through a lens. We see through a fog, barely making out shapes and shadows.

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<sup>128</sup> Ron Martoia, *The Bible As Improv: Seeing and Living the Script in New Ways* (Nashville, TN: Zondervan, 2010), Kindle, 1201.

## APPENDIX 05: POSTMODERN EXPOSES THE GRIP OF MODERNITY

Much has been written about postmodernism, so I will refrain from going into too much detail. Post- means after or beyond. So, postmodernism is the acknowledgement that we are in an era that is beyond the modern era, after the modern era. Modernism is tied to the Enlightenment, so our language could even include post-enlightenment. For our purposes, I will single out one drastic divergence between the modern concept of knowing and the postmodern one. Stanley Grenz, in his significant work, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, explains, “The Enlightenment perspective assumes that knowledge is not only certain (and hence rational) but also objective. The assumption of objectivity leads the modernist to claim access to dispassionate knowledge.”<sup>129</sup> In other words, we can achieve a knowledge that is free from limitations; we can achieve an objective perspective.

Postmodernism, on the other hand, rejects the Enlightenment project of the modern era.

The postmodern mind no longer accepts the Enlightenment belief that knowledge is objective. Knowledge cannot be merely objective, say the postmoderns, because the universe is not mechanistic and dualistic but rather historical, relational, and personal. The world is not simply an objective given that is “out there,” waiting to be discovered and known; reality is relative, indeterminate, and participatory.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 158, Kindle.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

Postmodernism is not just an intellectual exercise, but a style and mood. Downing considers postmodernism more of an “ethos than a worldview.”<sup>131</sup> An ethos is that which shapes the style and attitude of the culture. Ron Martoia declares, “We have undergone a shift from our Newtonian cause-and-effect worldview to the highly relational, interconnected, and what at times appears to be a random but well-webbed quantum world.”<sup>132</sup> Essentially, postmodernity has flooded the Western mind to the point where we are firmly within a postmodern age.

The modern era’s influence has saturated our ideas of Christ following and the church, so much so that I can easily identify my own dualistic, cause-and-effect, objective perspective of knowledge, all being heavily tied to the faith I grew up in. And yet I have spent the better part of my twenty years in ministry trying to uncouple Christ following from the mechanistic and objectivity-obsessed modern version that I grew up most familiar with.

While Christ is not limited to modern or postmodern perspectives, following Christ is a real and present action within whatever age we live. Some of the very struggles we have of disorientation between life and faith are due to the grip modernity has on the Church. Things must change.

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<sup>131</sup> Crystal Downing, *How Postmodernism Serves (My) Faith: Questioning Truth in Language, Philosophy, and Art* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), Kindle, 2663.

<sup>132</sup> Ron Martoia, *Transformational Architecture: Reshaping Our Lives as Narrative* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 28-29.