

Ben Best, Co-host

Welcome to *defragmenting*, a podcast of Cairn University, promoting biblical integrity and thoughtful Christianity.

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Drawing from his own journey of deconstructing and reconstructing his Christian faith, Ian Harber describes deconstruction as an existential crisis of faith that consists of much more than intellectual questioning. In this episode, he joins Dr. Keith Plummer, offering insights about how to understand and accompany loved ones in the midst of such crises. Among the topics they discuss are contributing factors to deconstruction, the importance of a theology of suffering, and the vital roles of sound biblical truth and genuine Christian community in healing and reconstruction. Let's join their conversation now.

Dr. Keith Plummer

The word "deconstruction" has become a familiar term in evangelical Christian circles. My conversation partner today has written about it as one who, over an almost 10-year period, deconstructed and reconstructed his faith. Ian Harber is the author of *Walking Through Deconstruction: How to Be a Companion in a Crisis of Faith*, published by IVP. And while the book contains a number of autobiographical elements, it's not an autobiography or a memoir, it's a guide of sorts. In it, Ian writes, "What I hope to do in this book is serve the church in this crucial ministry as someone who has been deeply hurt by the church and wonderfully healed by Jesus through the ministry of the local church." Ian is the director of communications and marketing for *Mere Orthodoxy*, and he explores faith, doubt, and reconstruction through his Substack newsletter, *Back Again*. Ian, it's good to see you again. Welcome to *defragmenting*, and thank you for making the time.

Ian Harber

Keith, I'm very excited to be here with you. Thank you for having me on today.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Sure. Before we get into what deconstruction is and some of your story, tell us a little bit about your early Christian life. When did you become a Christian, and what was the atmosphere leading up to your deconstruction?

Ian Harber

That's a great question. I've always had a hard time answering that question—when was I saved or when did I become a Christian?—because there's probably three different answers to it. In some regard, you could say I grew up a Christian. I was raised in a Christian home after the age of three. So I actually grew up in a broken home. I ended up not living with my parents because of CPSKs and different things that went on there and ended up living with my grandparents. My grandparents were wonderful. I have nothing bad to say about my grandparents. They were great. They were both believers. They raised me in the church, and they raised me in Christian schools. In that regard, I was raised Christian like a lot of other people. Like everybody's childhood, there's a mixed bag of things. But for me, when I was growing up in those environments, one word that I think you could use for it is fundamentalist. Another word that I gravitate towards more now is this word anxious. I think there were very anxious environments. Just the type of places that they have a very narrow perspective of what it means to be a Christian.

Ian Harber

Now, obviously, there are boundaries to what it means to be a Christian, but also Christianity has been around for 2000 years, and a lot of people have had different thoughts or different streams of what that means. By anxious, what I mean is if you even had questions about some of those things, these environments tended to focus on more secondary or tertiary issues of the faith, things that tend to divide Christians more than the things that are core to the faith that have always united Christians. If you started to question those things in terms of how they held their doctrines, and so to question something like the age of the Earth or different particular interpretations of the end times, or even, and this is where it gets even more complicated, or different political perspectives is basically to question the entire faith. Like your salvation was in question at that point. So there would be times

when I'd be sitting in Bible class at school and having conversations and trying to figure things out and work through these things and told that I might not be a Christian or one person called me the downfall of America because, again, these political things and theological things, there's no difference between those for some people.

Dr. Keith Plummer

So there was an all-or-nothing mentality.

Ian Harber

All-or-nothing mentality, for sure. I just wrestled with that for lots of reasons. There was a lot of suffering in my childhood that I was going through, not least of which is dealing with wrestling with who I am and my identity in terms of coming from the kind of family that I came from and what that meant for me. But then also just I experienced a lot of death. My grandmother who raised me died the day after Christmas. And then that was the first of 12 funerals that I went to in about two and a half years that ended with my mom taking her own life. And then after that, I had a mentor who abused a number of my friends in my church and different things like that. And so it was just a very hard time of growing up in that kind of environment and experiencing all of that and being handed very simplistic answers and wanting to really wrestle with them and understand the depth of those things and how they applied. And I don't mean that in a very pragmatic way. I mean that more in an existential way to my life, the things I was wrestling with.

Ian Harber

And being met not just with a bunch of I-don't-know's, which probably would have been fine, but met with antagonism. And really, the word that I keep coming back to is that anxiety, that anxiousness of, to question these things is to, it's tantamount to questioning the entire faith, which ultimately leads to some kind of self-fulfilling prophecy because you start to wonder, well, if they can't handle this question, could they handle questions on the duty of Christ or the resurrection or the authority of Scripture or the Trinity, whatever else, or other downstream issues from that, like sexuality and other political issues, different things like that. So, yeah, that was a hard environment to grow up in and try to wrestle with my faith and come into a faith of my own and really trust God for myself. And so when did I become a Christian? I don't know. I mean, I think in some ways I grew up, you could say I was saved then. Somewhere near the beginning of my deconstruction, I had an experience with God that was very powerful that I think kept me in the Christian lane, if you will, even though I think I went into some places that were very sub-Christian, to say the least.

Ian Harber

It still had me moving in that direction. And that was an experience that sort of felt like salvation, even though things were very complicated after that. And then there was when my reconstruction started a number of years after all of that, where I felt this sort of settled confidence. I don't know if I'd call it salvation experience, but like, Oh, this is the real thing, and I can build my life on that. So, yeah, that's always been a hard question for me to answer.

Dr. Keith Plummer

As I read the section in which you talk about the varieties of loss and pain that you experienced, both in terms of a string of deaths, as well as dealing with your own questions. I couldn't help but think that is a great deal of pain to experience at such an early stage of life. And I was curious—in the midst of that suffering, what did that do concerning your belief in the existence and/or goodness of God?

Ian Harber

I don't think the environments that I grew up in meant to teach this, but I think there was sort of at least an implicit teaching that if you live your life a certain kind of way, then your life is going to go a certain kind of way. They would never call it a prosperity gospel. In fact, the place I grew up in would despise the prosperity gospel. But there was this moral prosperity gospel of if you live your life right, then you will have a good life, and God will do nothing but bless a righteous life, and things will go well for you. And that's just simply not true. This is maybe a slightly simplistic way of looking at it, but in the wisdom literature, we have these three books that all go together—Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job. And I think you have to hold those things together for a reason. Because if you have just a

Proverbs faith, which is sort of what maybe I was growing up in, then you take these principles and you claim them as promises. And then when life doesn't go that way, it's like God isn't living up to your expectations. Whereas the wisdom literature gives you those principles for a reason.

Ian Harber

Yes, you should live a moral life, live a wise life, those kinds of things. These are good. You should pay attention to them. But Ecclesiastes and Job are there for a reason, talking about when life doesn't go that way. In fact, Job will go so far to depict it as God allowing life to not go that way. And so, I think that's what I was raised in, that Proverbs only faith of do these things and life will go well for you. And all around me, I mean, I was very young at the time, but all around me, I was kind of saying, that's not actually how this works. I was experiencing suffering at a very young age all throughout my childhood, up into, well, I mean, up to last year, I'm still suffering. You know what I mean? So dealing with those kinds of things, just not really knowing, not having categories. And I think one of the things that drew me more into sort of the progressive Christian circles at the time is that they weren't afraid to talk about that. They actually had categories for suffering and darkness and the dark night of the soul and loss and grief, at least at the time or it appeared to me to be just much more emotionally aware of being able to process difficult things.

Ian Harber

And that was very, it seems to me, obviously, attractive to me because where I was at didn't have categories for those kinds of things. And so, I think evangelicalism has made some strides in that regard since then, over the past decade plus. But at the time, that was very, why can nobody hold these dark things of life in tension with everything else? Then there was a crew that kinda could, but there was also a crew that in order to do that, felt the need to abandon the authority of Scripture, abandon orthodox doctrine, abandon the church to do that. And in some ways, I understand that impulse because it was hard to find that in the church. It was hard to find that where I was. And so if that's what you're looking for, then there's something to that impulse that says, I need to get out of here in order to find that. What we really should be doing is building our churches in such a way that our cultures have space for that. That's one of the things I appreciate about the church calendar. We're in the season of Lent right now. And, you know, kind of like what I mentioned a couple of years ago, that we had an event happen in our family that was very difficult.

Ian Harber

It happened right before Lent, and we thought, Oh, my gosh, there is a time built into our church's calendar to repent of sin and to process loss and to just sit in the darkness of the world, looking forward to the hope of the resurrection that is coming at the end of this. Things like that are helpful. But yeah, at the time, there was just no categories for that. That was actually one of the draws to me away from orthodoxy and away from the church.

Dr. Keith Plummer

You discussed the tendency to valorize doubt in those kind of circles. And you also talk about, I'm jumping ahead, we'll get there, I hope, but towards the end of the book, you talk about the importance, the necessity, of having a theology of suffering. At one point, you write, "Suffering must be integral to our picture of discipleship. Alongside learning Scripture and doctrine, Christians should be prepared for trials." And then you have this quotation that I love from a teacher in your life who said, "We do theology in the light so we can stand on it in the dark." That was golden. We've been using the word deconstruction. Let's talk about how you define it. But before we do, you lay out some misconceptions in terms of what it's not. Could you say a bit about what people might be prone to think of when they hear deconstruction? And then let's talk about how you construe it.

Ian Harber

Yeah, deconstruction is one of those tricky words. It's not too dissimilar from evangelical of, you know, it means kind of whatever the person saying it wants it to mean. And so there's lots of different ways of thinking about it. And my goal with this book was to take a more experiential approach to it as someone who has gone through it and knows other people who have gone through it and has been watching the conversation online for years and years and years and knows what it's like to go through it. And so my goal wasn't to make the end-all be-all definition of deconstruction, but really to kind of

create a relational bridge between people who are going through it and the people who are around them so they have common language to talk about it. And so when I was writing that definition, I was kind of looking at the other ways that people use it and just realizing that there was truth to all of them, and yet they all seem to be missing a crucial aspect of it, which kind of made it not true. And so, you know, one example of that is that, deconstruction is one step on the way to apostasy. It's like, well, of course, people deconstruct and then they apostatize and leave the faith.

Ian Harber

That happens all the time. I understand why people think that. And yet that is not an inevitable outcome of deconstruction. People deconstruct all the time and actually go through that process into a stronger faith than before. And so even though apostasy is one potential outcome, it is not the only potential outcome. Again, I understand the anxiety someone might feel when they see somebody going through deconstruction, that it could lead to that. But my encouragement is that it doesn't have to lead to that. And so equating deconstruction and apostasy, I don't think is helpful or the right way to approach it. Kind of on the other end of the spectrum is this idea of, well, deconstruction is great. It's just asking questions. If you're just asking questions, what's wrong with that? Everybody should be deconstructing. I think, yeah, everybody should be asking good questions about their faith and making it their own and working to understand it. This idea of faith seeking understanding is central to a lot of this. But if it's just asking questions, then we really need to stop just using the word because it's not helpful at all, and we're all deconstructing, and that's just part of what it means to be a Christian.

Ian Harber

And also, if you were to go to somebody who's deconstructing—like, I tell the story of a friend of mine in the book where she's going through this experience and telling her friend about it. Her friend responds with that perspective. And my friend goes, Yeah, I'm thinking critically. I'm asking good questions. And I also can't sleep at night because I'm terrified. What's that about? And I resonate with that experience. I know a lot of other people do, too, that there's this existential layer to it that saying it's just asking questions, it almost feels insulting because, yes, it's a part of it, but it's not the actual thing that's going on. Then there's this third way, this sort of via media of thinking about it, where some people want to say, and a lot of these people who say this, I like them, and I think they're brilliant people, and I just want to tweak what they say a little bit. But they say, well, there's two kinds of deconstruction. There's good, healthy deconstruction and bad, unhealthy deconstruction. Good, healthy deconstruction is when you critique culture with the Bible and you're going through this process in community, in the church, with the Scriptures.

Ian Harber

And I want to say yes and amen to all that, I agree with that sentiment. And bad and unhealthy deconstruction is when you critique Scripture with the culture and you leave the church and you leave community and you isolate yourself. And yes, I want to say all that's not helpful. That's not great. But what's difficult about that is, again, I don't think it gets to the experiential aspect of it. Because if you consider somebody who's been hurt by the church in some significant way, whether they've been abused or they've experienced someone else being abused and that abuse being covered up or some other situation in the church, and/or they've seen—they've been on the receiving end of Scripture being twisted in order to attack them or manipulate them or take it out of context to just, again, provide a very negative experience for them. And then you go say to them, well, don't leave the church, don't leave the Bible, these kinds of things. These are things that have been weaponized against them. And there's a significant loss of trust that has happened in that relationship between the person in the church and the Bible. And so even though I agree with the sentiment in some ways, there has to be a significant amount of trust building that has to happen in order for that to occur.

Ian Harber

And that's not something that's just going to happen by, you know, exhorting somebody to do that. They actually have to rebuild those kinds of relationships in that trust. And so I just don't think it's a very helpful way of framing it, even though some of the sentiment about it is correct. And so to get to my definition, if that's where we're going with this, the way I define deconstruction is I'm trying to capture multiple aspects of this into a single sentence. And I think of this more like pieces of a puzzle. It's not just one thing. It's a dynamic definition that you're going to emphasize different things for

different people based on their experiences. But this is how I define it: "Deconstruction is a crisis of faith that leads to the questioning of core doctrines and untangling of cultural ideologies that settles in a faith that is different than before."

Ian Harber

Parts of that definition, I think, are going to be familiar to a lot of people. Things that we already talked about, the questioning of core doctrines, the untangling of cultural ideologies. It's settling in something that looks different than before, whether that's leaving the faith entirely, or their faith on the other side just looks different than it does beforehand.

Ian Harber

But what I think is missing from those other three things that we just talked about is that crisis of faith. All of this is couched under the umbrella of it being a crisis of faith, which is terrifying. And it's not primarily an intellectual exercise or experience. It's actually an existential and spiritual experience first. And everything intellectual about it is downstream of that existential spiritual experience. I think a lot of times we get that flipped. We think, Oh, somebody's thinking is messed up. They're just listening to all the wrong voices. Some of that might be true. And that's what's causing this spiritual crisis down here. And I wanna flip that and say, no, there's a spiritual crisis that's happening that's influencing the intellectual side of things.

Dr. Keith Plummer

That's helpful. You say that if we don't understand deconstruction as a crisis of faith before anything else, we won't understand it at all. You also say that no one sets out to deconstruct their faith. They become aware of it once it has begun. Could you say something about that? Because I think it's related to what you were just describing.

Ian Harber

Yeah, I think that's another misconception that people have. So, what I want to contend is that nobody wakes up one morning and says, I want to grow in my faith. I want to get closer to the Lord. And I just wonder what the best way for me to do that is. I know what I'm going to do—I'm going to deconstruct my faith. I just don't think if you go ask anybody who's been through deconstruction, "Is that your experience?" I just think you're going to have a really hard time finding that person. It is something that happens to you. And I think in some ways this is where it has a lot in common with things like St. John of the Cross' *Dark Night of the Soul* or different things that have been experienced throughout church history and even in Scripture, where you experience this almost absence of God, where before you experience the presence of God. And this is a real experience that has been had and documented in Scripture in the Psalms throughout church history, but for some reason, evangelicalism has lost the language for. The only real category that we have for something like that is backsliding.

Ian Harber

Like you're sliding out of the faith, and that's not how it's historically been talked about. Now, I'm not saying that's not a real dynamic. I just don't think it's this dynamic. It's something that usually is going on for a period of time, and someone is gradually realizing it until something happens. I don't know. It doesn't matter what it is. Something happens, and it's like a trapdoor opens out from under their feet, and they're in this—they fall into this dark room with no lights, and they're just trying to fumble around in the dark for a light switch so they can see where they are and just try to get a lay of the land, you know? And so that's why something like, "Oh, do the good deconstruction, not the bad deconstruction" just sort of falls flat. It's like, I don't know what's good. I don't know what's bad. I don't know what I'm doing. I don't know how I got in this room in the first place. I'm just trying to figure out where I'm at because this is not where I was before. And so one of the ways I try to map, emotionally, deconstruction throughout the book is through the five stages of grief, because deconstruction is—if it's a crisis, it's a crisis because it's a loss.

Ian Harber

It's a loss of God and community and identity and a whole bunch of other things. And that first stage of grief, denial, is important because it kinda gets at that fact of somebody's in this process before they even realize it. Now, maybe they feel that something's off and they're trying to hold it at bay. But

at some point that dam breaks, and you're kind of into what you would properly understand as deconstruction. But it's not something that you just wake up and decide to do. It's something that happens to you, and then you realize it.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Yes. That section on the stages of grief was very, very helpful. Those stages being denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance, and how it is that someone who is going through deconstruction experiences each of those. I want to go back to something that you said, though, because I think it's really key, and it will give people an idea of more of what you're trying to do with the book. First, I want to draw attention to the fact that the book is subtitled *How to Be a Companion in a Crisis of Faith*. So while there certainly would be elements of this that I think would be helpful to someone going through, your real aim was to help other members of the body of Christ to know what things to look for and how to be what you call a non-anxious presence and be of assistance to someone who's going through it. And you also mentioned this idea that what you do in the first part of the book, which is all on describing elements of deconstruction, which you said you think of as like puzzle pieces, you want to guard people against saying all deconstruction is going to take the same form, but here are some ingredients that may be there or not or be there in differing measures, things to just be mindful of. Is that accurate?

Ian Harber

Yeah, definitely. Because this is the hard thing about it is deconstruction is a very personal experience. And so that's what's hard about some of these other definitions, and I've read other definitions of deconstruction, and they all just sort of seem to fall flat because I think as soon as you define it, I can think of an exception to it. And so that's why even in writing my definition of it, I really wanted to, as succinctly as possible, even though I know it's a wordy definition, capture a broad array of experiences, and then just immediately say—and you're going to experience exceptions to this, or you're going to experience people and stories who don't fit this to a T. So don't read this like a flat dictionary definition. Read this more like a dynamic puzzle. And something that starts one way at the beginning might morph into something else. And so something that—you know, somebody starts really losing their bearings because of cultural issues might turn into theological issues somewhere down the road and almost not even thinking about the cultural issues anymore or vice versa. It just becomes so much more complicated than one thing. And someone's crisis might be more intense or less intense than someone else's, and so, just trying to create really more of like a living dynamic definition that can flex with the person rather than the static, here's what it is for everybody.

Dr. Keith Plummer

You also identify a number of catalysts, things that can kindle deconstruction. And you identify things like cultural Christianity, compromised churches, compounded anxiety. One of the things that you describe that you somewhat touched on in your speaking so far is the expectations that often are attached to our Christian life, not having the language for suffering, not having the language for the "dark night of soul," the hiddenness of God. And you use a term, you talk about this "up and to the right spirituality" that sets up some expectations that, when life does not pan out that way, raises a whole lot of doubts. Could you say something about what you mean by this "up and to the right spirituality?"

Ian Harber

Yeah. It's depicted really well in the movie *The Great Gatsby*. I've never actually talked about this before, but there's this moment where Jay Gatsby, he looks up in the sky and he sees a star shoot over him and he says, "My life has to be going like this," and he points to the star that's shooting off. And I think that is, in some ways, our view of the spiritual life is we need to be shooting off into the distance and always going up and burning brighter and brighter every single day as we go. And that's not how our faith works. I think we have this expectation that, if I'm following after God, I'm going to experience more and more of His presence. I'm going to experience more and more passion for him. I'm going to be... It's very revivalistic. It's very emotions-based. I think that is not a realistic portrait of the Christian life. The Psalms are the easiest thing to point to. We're—right now as a church, we're studying Lamentations, and that's another great example. You just go look at Scripture, and that's just a categorically false picture of what life with God looks like.

Ian Harber

And this, of course, is typified most of all on the cross. Jesus did not have this perfect "up and to the right" life because right in the middle of His life, He's—I mean, I guess in the end of His life—but He's crucified. And that becomes the picture of what it means to follow Him. He calls us to take up our cross to follow Him, that in order to gain our life, we have to lose our life. And so some people have kind of talked about this J-curve that is probably a more accurate depiction of life with God, that the way up is actually the way down. And there's a big one that happens, and that's your salvation. We're actually transferred from the domain of darkness into the kingdom of the beloved Son. But then that happens all the time throughout your life over and over and over again. And so when you have these, kind of like what I said earlier, this moral prosperity gospel or revivalistic prosperity gospel of just thinking, I should always be experiencing more and more of the positive feelings that I associate with God, then you're setting people up for failure, I think, at least in terms of their expectations.

Ian Harber

And having a much more realistic view of it's not that you won't experience suffering, it's that your suffering is actually part of God's sovereign plan in your life for your sanctification. So I have a chapter on suffering in the book, and my outline is just this verse from Romans 5. And the verse kicks off with Paul saying that "we glory in our sufferings." And I was like, there is a category that Paul has where your suffering becomes your glory. You glory in your sufferings. And that is completely different than this "up and to the right," everything's getting better, better, better. It's like, no, actually, when things get worse, that is an indication that God is doing something in my life and turning that suffering—redeeming that suffering—into my glory. And that's a completely different, upside-down perspective than what I was raised with and what I think a lot of people in evangelicalism, specifically, have been raised with.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Yeah. When I read that section of your book, two figures came to my mind. One is John Newton, whom I love. And in one of his letters, he writes about the stages of Christian life. And he says that, in the early stages, in order to give encouragement, the Lord often gives what He calls "cordials" to the new believer—the sweetness and so forth that he comes to expect is going to be the norm. And then as he goes on, there's a diminishing of that, and he thinks that something is wrong and begins to panic. But this is how God is teaching him to trust. But the other figure that came to my mind, and you might be familiar with this illustration, I once heard the late David Powlison say that sanctification is like a yo-yo in the hand of a man walking upstairs.

Ian Harber

I love that. That's great.

Dr. Keith Plummer

And that there is, overall, there's an upward trajectory, but it is not minus valleys and peaks. And when I read that "up and to the right," I thought, we view this as though the Christian life is to be this 45 degree incline from the point of conversion to death. And then, when that doesn't turn out to be the case, rather than questioning what our expectations are, we question, well, is this stuff true?

Ian Harber

Yeah.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Well, let's take a break here. We're going to have a few messages, and then we'll come back and pick up with more discussion about the book.

Ben Best, Co-host

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Ben Best, Co-host

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Dr. Keith Plummer

I am back with Ian Harber. We're talking about his book, *Walking Through Deconstruction: How to Be a Companion in a Crisis of Faith*. One of the things that you discuss in the book, for those walking with someone through deconstruction and their anxieties in it, you had a helpful discussion about how walking with someone through this can also be challenging for the companion in terms of causing him or her to do some question-asking about their own faith and whether or not they really trust this. Can you say something about that?

Ian Harber

Yeah, so when someone's going through this, they're coming up with all these questions that are all legitimate questions. Again, going back to—some of these are doctrinal, some of these are cultural, but all of them are valid, in my opinion. But if you're raised in that, if this is coming up in one of those anxious environments that we talked about at the beginning of this, then there's kind of two things that are going to happen or could happen. One, you're going to be met with that anxiety of pushing back and not wanting to deal with those kinds of questions and not even look at them. Or, even if you aren't met with that anxiety, these could be questions that that person has never even thought of, that it really has been more of it. I don't mean this in a derogatory way at all. In fact, some ways I'm jealous of it, but more of a simple faith of just receiving those kinds of things and not really thinking too much of them and just saying, yes, these are obviously self-evidently true. And so they just never really came to someone's mind. And so when you start poking holes in things, when you get into arguments that this person has never heard before, it can be scary for them, too, and ignite their deconstruction.

Ian Harber

And so if we switch positions and put ourselves in that person's shoes for a few minutes, there's a couple of things. One, you're pushing back with that anxiety of not wanting to deal with it. Or, if you're being exposed to those sorts of questions to begin with, there's another couple of paths for you there. One is you go down more of an intellectual path and you start deconstructing yourself, trying to—I've just never heard these arguments against the faith before, or wow, that actually sounds way more credible than the person in my worldview class taught me or whatever. Or, you're wanting to relationally comfort and be for that person, which I think there's something good in that desire, but sometimes what that looks like is compromising on your actual beliefs and convictions. And so one of the most obvious examples, the lowest hanging fruit here, is if somebody is wrestling through deconstruction, primarily because of their sexuality. They feel attracted to the same sex or they're feeling confused about their gender or something like that. And they come to that person for comfort, for help, for guidance, something like that. And the person actually ends up changing their view on that topic in order to not offend that person.

Ian Harber

And my contention there is that if it's that easy to change your mind on a topic that important, then I would question that person's conviction to begin with. How much did you actually believe that topic, that belief, that issue, if all it took was one person to change your mind with very little argumentation, very little whatever—just thinking about it purely relationally. Now, of course, we do want to think through things relationally, but if you're able to change that quickly, then it actually signals to that person that we're not so sure how serious you are about this whole thing to begin with if it was that easy. And so I think what some people need to understand is that when you're walking with someone who's deconstructing, it's a stress test on your own faith in a number of different potential ways. And I don't think that needs—we don't need to compromise in order to be compassionate. We don't need to not have convictions in order to care for people. This is not an either/or, pick-your-battle situation. You can do both. You can stand on your convictions. You can care for that person, have compassion for them.

Ian Harber

And if they're bringing challenges to your faith that are scary to you or you don't have responses for, then instead of just trying to relationally appease right off the bat or meet them with an anxious response that shuts them down or allowing yourself to freak out about the first intellectual argument that you hear, I think what's better is just to have this calm curiosity about it and just say, "Okay, I don't know. I don't know. I wish I knew these things better than I did, and I don't. And what I want to do is go down this path with you and see what's there and learn and let my faith grow, too. I'm going to have a commitment to Jesus that maybe you don't feel in this moment. I have a trust that Jesus is in all of this, even when He feels far away, and so I'm not letting Him go, but you're right—those are hard questions, and I should press in on my faith, too, and I'm going to go on this journey with you.

Dr. Keith Plummer

You say of your own reconstruction that you have a settled confidence in Jesus, though you don't have the certainty concerning all of the issues that, at one point, you questioned. And it sounds like that's related to—both for the person who is going through the deconstruction, but the person who is coming alongside. And that difference—could you say something about that difference? Because I think that it is the search for the former that often creates the anxiety in people. What is the difference between the certainty that you were after and the settled confidence in Christ and the church that you now have?

Ian Harber

That's a great question. This kinda keeps coming back to, in a lot of ways, that split between the intellectual and the existential, right? And I think that desire for certainty is primarily an intellectual certainty of—I have all the answers, I know what I believe about everything, and it's all tidy and cleaned up for me, and yeah, I feel great about it, you know? Whereas this settled confidence, or really another word that the church has always used is just this idea of trust—just this trust in God—is not necessarily an intellectual certainty. It is a lot more of an existential settling of, just, I know enough, not just intellectually, but relationally, I know enough of this God that I can trust him. Then it becomes a, I think it's—I could be getting this wrong—but I think it's Anselm's idea of faith seeking understanding. I have faith. I have trust. I've given my allegiance to God because I know I can trust Him. And now I'm on a lifelong journey of understanding. And also, part of that understanding is knowing that God is infinite, God is transcendent, and I will never fully know Him, but also, He has relationally made Himself known to me through the Holy Spirit, through the Scriptures, through Christ, through His church, and I *can* know Him.

Ian Harber

And so I think it's just this much more existential settling of, I can trust Him, which means I know that what He wants for me is good, and I can follow Him even when I don't understand where that's going, even when I don't know what that means in every situation, even when I don't have all my answers to everything. Going back to the—one thing I kind touch on in the book is talking about doctrine and certainty. I'm not certain about what I believe about every single doctrinal issue. There's a lot of questions that I still have. One way I've started—this is not a scientific thing, this is more just sort of anecdotal—but one way I started thinking about it is this, like, idea of doctrinal probabilities. When I read the Bible, what is the best explanation I can come up with? And there are certain doctrinal topics right now that I feel 55%, 45% on. It wouldn't take a lot for me to change my mind on that issue. But the best I can read the Bible, that's what I can believe. And that allows me to hold a conviction to the degree of my certainty, which sometimes that's low, but it means, you know what? I can say no, I put my flag here in this issue, but I hold it with an open hand, understanding that people who disagree with me are brilliant and also love the Lord and read the Bible well.

Ian Harber

And so the closer those things are to the core, the more those things matter. But I think, flipping again from what does certainty mean? If we're talking about intellectual certainty and you want to have certainty about every single thing you believe, every single day of your life, I don't know if that's a realistic expectation. But if you want to have this sense of, I can trust God through thick and thin, no matter what, and I trust that He's going to be good to me and lead me beside still waters, then I can trust Him, and I will go with that. And I think that is a much more realistic place to consider.

Dr. Keith Plummer

You mentioned doctrine. In the second half of the book, after you deal with deconstructing and the various forms that it takes with respect to relationships, institutions, God, so forth, the second half of the book, you're dealing with reconstructing. Reconstructing a number of things—one of the chapters is beliefs. And in that chapter, you talk about how it is that doctrine should be conceived of as part of story, by which you don't mean fiction, but it's related to story and imagination. Could you say something about that? Because I think a lot of times when we think about deconstruction, we just think about not assenting to these propositions, but you're bringing out how doctrine is designed to be story-like and script-like for our lives. It's not just these bullet points that we have to check off. How is that important to the reconstructing process?

Ian Harber

So I'm going to talk about intellect a lot in this conversation because it's a function of all of it. One thing that I don't want to happen when I'm flipping things around and talking about an existential first is that I displace the importance of intellect. I think what I want to do is put intellect back in its proper place—rationality back in its proper place—which is not just a fact machine. You know, you're not just trying to study God like an animal on *National Geographic* and get all the right facts about Him. That's not the purpose of your mind and your rationality, right? We are an integrated creature—heart, soul, mind, body, and social relations, love your neighbor as yourself. And so that's what it means to be a human being, a creature who's made in the image of God.

Ian Harber

So your mind has a function. And so what is doctrine doing? Your mind is informing your imagination of how the world in reality actually is. That's a formational thing. That doesn't just change your mind about things, that changes your character about things. That changes the way you relate to people about things. That changes the jobs you choose. That changes a lot about everything about the way you are, what you actually think. That's why Paul talks about "be transformed"—your whole person—"be transformed by the renewing of your mind." And so doctrine's role in that is not just trying to get all the right answers on a test and submitting your Scantron into the heavenly machine so that you can get through the gates when you die, right? It's actually—doctrine is meant to transform your imagination about all of reality. And so a better way of thinking about doctrine to me, and I'm learning this from Kevin Vanhooser's books and all that, but it's as a script of a story. The drama of doctrine, as Vanhooser would say, and what that does is it lets you know what story are you living in? What story are you believing? What story are you participating and playing a role in? Are you participating and playing a role in expressive individualism and therapeutic consumerism and Christian nationalism and this moralistic therapeutic deism and romanticism? And you can go on and on and on about all of these false stories that we are living in by default. And the algorithms on our feed only exacerbate this and make this worse because they're giving us a million stories.

Ian Harber

And then we hover over for five seconds instead of two seconds the stories that are most compelling to us. And then it filters us into bubbles, and we just get nothing but that story and reinforces that identity, right? And so this is important. This is huge. We are all being fed doctrines by other stories that are indoctrinating us into their version of reality, whether we know it or not. And so what Christian doctrine is doing is saying, no, no, no, this is the real story of the world, of reality that God is telling, and this is what your role in it looks like for for you to flourish as a full human being, heart, soul, mind, strength, and relationships. I'll give you one example of this. This is probably my favorite example, but this is true about everything, is the doctrine of the Trinity. And so when I was growing up, you basically—there's only two ways of talking about the Trinity, which is, Oh, I just can't even fathom it. It just makes my head explode, and you just stop talking about it right there, which is true. Or all of these analogies that are actually heresies, like eggs and water and three-leaf clovers.

Ian Harber

They're trying to be helpful, and it's actually not helpful. It's like, that's modalism. But anyways. But then you have this line from Jesus, and there's more than this in the Bible, obviously. But you have this line from Jesus when He's talking with His disciples in, I think it's John 14. He's praying to the Father, and He says, "I pray that you would love them the way that you have loved me from before creation."

He's giving you this glimpse into the life of God before anything was ever made. What was it? It was a Father loving a Son and a Son being loved by His Father forever. So the only way that you could say that God is love is if God has always, for eternity, been loving and being loved. And the only way that's possible is for God Himself to be a relational being. And you only get that with the Trinity. And so if you want to talk about stories, if you want to say God is love, you can only say that with a trinitarian God. So you've just taken every other religion off the table. You've just taken every other spirituality off the table.

Ian Harber

You've just taken every other conception of God that isn't trinitarian off the table just by saying God is love. So that's one layer. The next layer is it's not a generic love either. It is a love between a Father and a Son for all eternity. It is a relational, familial, eternal love. That completely changes the way that you conceptualize all of your relationships and everything about the universe is that it is actually always a Father loving a Son and a Son being loved by a Father. As someone who has those kinds of wounds in my own life, knowing that that is not only the nature, but the shape of God's love is probably the most healing thing I can possibly imagine. In that, what salvation is, it's not simply the forgiveness of sins. It's not simply reconciling you in right standing with God, even though it is both of those things, but it is actually, by the Spirit, drawing you in through your union with Christ into the middle of that trinitarian love. All of a sudden, you have just done doctrine in a way that completely reorders and reorganizes everything about your self-perception, your perception of the world, your perception of your relationships with others, including your own family, and your perception of God and reality itself.

Ian Harber

By one doctrine or two doctrines. Then you just multiply that *ad infinitum* across all the truths that Christianity brings with us. Colossians has that line where it says, "In Christ are hidden all the treasures of knowledge and wisdom." You can just open up Christ and dig forever into the knowledge and the wisdom that is in Him, and you will never hit the bottom. And if the more that we understand that to be true, the more we will see an accurate picture of everything.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Yeah. What you just did is quite contrary to what I have often heard, which is this—because I have had these deep wounds in my life, maybe with a father, then I can't grasp the fatherhood of God. And what you did was flip that and said, No, what I was given in life was a distortion. This is the true, and I'm going to allow that to reorient me. But it's very tempting, I would imagine, for someone to say, Well, I don't know that, so I can't know this. But I like what you—how you approach that. You, several times, surprised me in what you wrote, because after reading some of your backstory, you said things about the church that I wouldn't have expected. And you said things to and about people who are in various parts of the process of deconstructing that I wouldn't have expected. Again, knowing your backstory some, you promise early in the book, you say that you're going to be brutally honest, and I think that you sought to do that both with respect to those who are going through deconstructing and with respect to the church. But one thing that came out very clearly throughout the book is what you call this defiant hopefulness.

Dr. Keith Plummer

And when someone has experienced church hurt, let's say, that you have experienced and that many have experienced, there is this thought, "I need to just cut myself off from that." And you have said just the opposite. And at one point, you say that though we experience such pain in the context of relationships, it is only going to be in the context of relationships that we are going to experience healing. I just wanted to hear you expound somewhat more, especially maybe even addressing someone who really has experienced great, great wrong in the context of relationships in the church. How is it that you can say you still need the church? You still need the relationships of the body of Christ in order to heal and to grow?

Ian Harber

That's a great question, Keith. When I think about those two phrases that I put there in the intro of the book of brutally honest and defiantly hopeful, I think if someone is going through deconstruction and

they have been really hurt by the church, then the brutally honest part can come easy to them. And in fact, there needs to be a time in their life where they need to be brutally honest, you know. And they might be surrounded by people who don't come off as defiantly hopeful. They might come off as naively hopeful. They don't really understand the issues that are going on around them. And that just adds to the frustration that they're experiencing. And I understand that. I really do. I'm not scared of being honest about the problems in the church, the problems in certain ways that we're taught the problems in culture. I think we have to be.

Ian Harber

You know, Boethius has this line in *Consolation of Philosophy* that he puts into the mouth of Lady Philosophy, Lady Wisdom. She says, If you want the doctor's help, you must reveal the wound. I think that's 100% true. If we want to heal from these things, if we want to grow from these things, you have to take off the bandage and pull back your sleeve and say, Look, here's what happened. Here's the wound. Here's what has gone on. And just be brutally honest about it, not be scared to look at it and talk about it and do those kinds of things. I think the problem is, and especially in a lot of deconstruction circles, I see this. But if all you are is brutally honest, then all you can do is tear down. You can't build something simply on the back of honesty, or to use a more charitable word, on the back of accountability. We need these kinds of things, but you can't build simply off the back of that. You can only build on the back of hope. You can only build your life, build communities, build institutions on the back of hope. Something that you're actually—it's a vision that you see of something that should be and could be, and you're building towards that. And so we have to have hopeful—it's one of the three theological virtues. These three remain: faith, hope, and love. We have to have hope. It's one of the three things that lasts. And so I want to encourage people who are going through this to—is you don't need to not be brutally honest.

Ian Harber

You can be. You should be. Please do. You won't get anywhere by pretending that things aren't the way that they actually are. That's part of what it means to live in the truth, is to be honest about these kinds of things. And yet, if we can't be hopeful about Christ saying that He will build His church, not any individual leader, not any individual movement or denomination or institution, but Christ will build His church, then hope is a requirement for us. And if we aren't hopeful, then we're allowing the people to hurt us to win. We're allowing them to turn us into the very thing that we are trying to get away from, which is a hurtful person who experiences bitterness in their hearts and can't actually love others the way they love themselves. But if we have hope, then we are aiming our life towards something in hope. That's what hope does, is it aims your life at something else. As Christians, we're aiming our life at Christ. And so being a part of a church, maybe not the church that hurt, in fact, not the church that hurt you, most likely, but not giving up on the church.

Ian Harber

A lot of the things that are talked about in this conversation is, what do we take literally? What do we take symbolically, and all the stuff. And one of the things I've really started to take literally recently is the church being the body of Christ. I don't think we think of that substantively enough. The church *being* the body of Christ and to actually be a part of the church and not some abstract theoretical capital "C" church, but an actual, local tangible expression of the church. Because how can we say that we can love what we can't see if we can't love those who we can see? We have to be able to love those that we can see, even all their difficulties, as an expression of loving the one who we can't see. And so uniting yourself to the physical body of Christ and physical flesh and blood relationships, spiritually bound together in covenant, I think is really, really important. And it's in that mutual giving of yourself to one another in the church that we actually experience Christ's steadfast unshakable love for us. And that's part of it. And if we're living our lives in isolation or in transience or in non-committedness, then we are going to experience God's love that way as well.

Ian Harber

Whereas that's actually what the church at its best is supposed to facilitate. That's one of the reasons we should take communion every week. I'm going to make an argument for it because it's the person who is not experiencing that, who is doubting that, but who every week—week in, week out—is invited to the table at the end of service says, take the body, take the blood that was given for you. And all of

us in this church are sharing this meal for you because we are affirming your profession of faith, even if it's difficult for you in this moment. We are holding your faith when it feels difficult for you to hold it, and you are being held by the body of Christ, even when you don't feel Him in any particular moment or season of your life.

Dr. Keith Plummer

You have much to say in the book about what you just discussed in terms of the necessity of these flesh and blood relationships. And you also talk about how it is that perhaps with our discontent hurt with the church, we have sought counterfeits. And at one point, because you talk about our media consumption and how that can be related to the deconstructing process. One point you wrote, "Social media has become the counterfeit institution we turn to when we feel uncomfortable in our physical institutions. Many times, the content that we consume rightly exposes abuse in the church. However, the media we consume isn't the liberation we think it is. It will rapture us out of our communities, our place, and our bodies, and into cyberspace, leaving us without the very things that bring meaning to our lives." And I know we could go off on so much just on that. But you see on social media how people are seeking community, and they may find it in common grievance. And that is both Christian and non. But what you are saying, and I just so appreciate the book for it, is that there is no substitute for the body of Christ, the community of God's people.

Dr. Keith Plummer

And though we may have experienced great atrocities in certain contexts, that does not mean that the institution of the church and Christ promised to build it is going to fail. So I'm really grateful for the strong voice with which you have consistently, through the book, emphasize that. What would be one of the greatest, with respect to most gratifying, things that you could hear back from someone who has read this in order to be a companion to someone who is going through deconstruction?

Ian Harber

Something someone sent me recently—this was a few days ago—someone recommended my book to them, and then this person DMed that person and the person sent me the message. And she said, My adult daughter is really wrestling with her faith, and I have not known what to do, and I have read books on deconstruction, and they all just feel argumentative. I don't know how to handle this relationship. I don't know what to talk to her about. I don't know what I'm supposed to do. So she read the book and she said, I finally feel like I know how to handle myself. I finally feel like I have permission to be compassionate, to just care for my daughter, to be patient with her, to pray with her, to pray for her, different things to think through in my conversation with her. I have a better understanding of maybe why she's going through this because it just never really made sense to me to begin with, and just feels more equipped to love her daughter well, not try to fix her, not try to answer every one of her questions, just to love her well through this and be there for her.

Ian Harber

And when I read that, I was just like, Yeah, man, that's exactly why I wrote this book. There's been other stories from people that are not quite that, but it's like, man, that's an incredible story. But when I think about hers, I'm like, that's why I wrote it. This mom who sees her daughter going through this and just feels completely lost on what to do and then gets on the other side of the book and feels like she has an understanding, feels like she can let go of control and just be there for her daughter, is maybe better equipped to have some good conversations and go down other rabbit holes that will maybe intellectually prepare her more than my book does, but it opened up those to her. I hope they have some very good conversations from here on out.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Yeah. Well, I have done my share of recommending it to people who were in similar situations. I wanted to let you know and let listeners know. I said that deconstruction has become a familiar term. I was speaking at a Christian retirement community about responding to questions, challenges, and objections from non-Christian loved ones. And there was a Q&A time, and this woman raised her hand and she said, Do you have any recommendations for things to read about deconstruction? And I was just so excited that someone here in this retirement community was thinking about that because they have loved ones who are going through that. And so I mentioned your book to them. Listeners, if

you know of someone who is in this themselves and you want to be of help, you want to be better equipped to, as Ian said, love them well, this is a very good volume to pick up. It is *Walking Through Deconstruction: How to Be a Companion in a Crisis of Faith* by Ian Harber. And Ian, I mentioned your Substack newsletter, *Back Again*. If people wanted to check that out, how can they do that?

Ian Harber

Yep, just go to backagainwords.com, and you can subscribe there. I'll be putting out some links once a month now, just that I think are interesting and helpful. And then I'll be writing more over at *Mere Orthodoxy* moving forward.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Great. Well, thank you again for this time. Thank you again for your labor in this book. May the Lord bless it in the lives of many. And I'm grateful for the time that you shared with us today. Thanks again.

Ian Harber

This has been a great conversation. Thank you, Keith.

Ben Best, Co-host

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