

Trending: DECONSTRUCTION

Brad Jersak

The God in whom the majority of Christians throughout history have professed to believe often seems evil, at least judging by the dreadful things we eventually say about him.

The God of retribution that has been proclaimed by so much of Christian knowledge is really not and cannot possibly be the God of self-outpouring love revealed in Christ. If God is the creator of all, he is the Savior of all without fail who brings to himself all he has made.

- David Bentley Hart

#DECONSTRUCTION

I agree whole-Hart-edly. If Christianity frequently devolves into worship of a retributive, counter-Christian God—then moving forward requires what is popularly called “deconstruction.” The term is a favorite among “nones” and “dones” who have flown the coop of the un-Christlike God and its institutions. It is especially used, overused and misused by “ex-vangelicals” who now often identify as “progressive.” I regularly encounter a new kind

of testimony—counter-conversion stories—that start with, “When I went through my deconstruction...” They have discovered if faith is to be retained at all, they must first pass through *the valley of disillusionment and deconstruction*.

Deconstruction is a metaphor that evokes images of jack-hammers, dynamite and building demolition. After all, don't you need to clear the lot of the decrepit ruins of a condemned building before you can build a new structure where it once stood?

On the other hand, the metaphor seems quite violent. The destructive tone of deconstruction expresses well the anger one feels when they realize they've been duped by religious doctrines and controlling leaders into life-long spiritual bondage. The lament quite rightly carries an edge to it—an impulse to raze the whole structure to the ground is understandable.

Then again, what is the “structure” we're deconstructing? It's not

actually somewhere out there—unless you're eradicating pastors, setting fire to cathedrals or actively dismantling religious institutions. Impassioned rants against something so vague as “the Church” in fact serve to deconstruct very little. No, when we speak of our deconstruction, the structure we're dismantling is first of all internal—something to do with one's own soul or faith. For that reason, I'm disinclined to the havoc and carnage inherent in the dynamite/bulldozer picture.

WEDDING DRESS STAINS

So, instead of deconstruction, I'd like to propose my own metaphor for spiritual renewal—a heart-warming illustration that comes from the biblical record, ancient hymnody and my own family. Both the Bible and the songs of the early church frequently compare God or Christ to a bridegroom and God's people to a bride. Books like Song of Solomon describe the bride's beauty and the glory of her



wedding day. Prophets, such as Hosea, lament her unfaithfulness.

When the people of God rebel, they are compared to an unfaithful wife who has “stained her garments.” By contrast, redemption in Christ is said to cleanse the Bride [and/or her dress] of every stain and ultimately present her to himself at the great wedding

feast of the Lamb “without spot or wrinkle.” When you think about the beauty and expense of a wedding gown, if the dress somehow gets stained or wrinkled, how does one best restore it?

When my oldest son got engaged a few years back, Colette, my daughter-to-be, began the quest for a vintage dress. To her great joy, she found a gorgeous ivory, silk satin wedding dress—sewn in the 1930s. The size seemed right, so she ordered it and sure enough, it fit perfectly without any alterations. It was a beautiful work of art! Naturally, the dress had aged for about 80 years and was showing some wrinkles and stains.

What to do? Deconstruction? No. You don’t use scissors to cut wrinkles out or flames to burn stains away. Removing the stains was important, but not as crucial as preserving the exquisite fabric. Thankfully, “I know a guy” who shares these values. Yong’s Tailoring advertises “Expert Dry Cleaners” on his marquee signage—rightfully so! Mr. Yong invested the time and meticulous care required to restore the dress to its former glory—drawing out the

stains without overusing products that could have ruined Colette’s treasure.

While waiting for the couple to pick it up, the drycleaner proudly displayed the wedding gown at the front of the shop for other customers to see. Folks who came in would *ooh!* and *aah!* at the dress, hanging there “without spot or wrinkle.” But then she put on the dress! To me, she looked like a real princess—elegant and radiant.

FROM DECONSTRUCTION TO RESTORATION

Do you see how shifting the metaphor from deconstruction to restoration shifts our focus from the more aggressive tone of tearing down to cleansing and renewal? Like Colette’s dress, your faith is a precious gift, an apostolic treasure inherited rather than self-fabricated, passed down over many centuries. Those centuries bring with it a history of corruption and abuse, but have also increased its value.

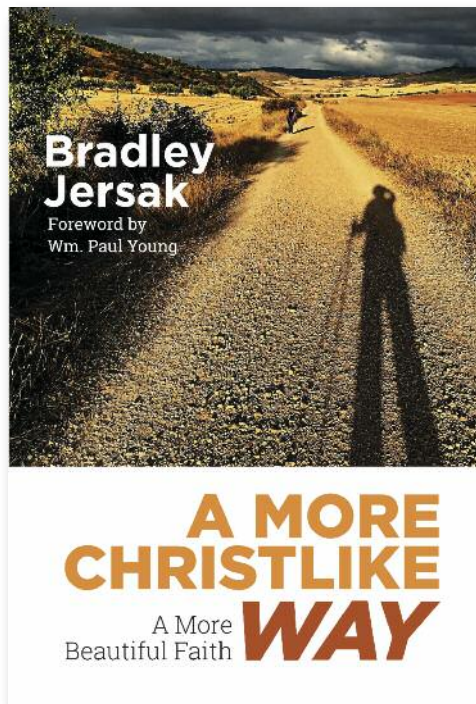
The gospel of Jesus Christ is not something you or I contrived or conceived. You didn’t sew this dress; you received it. It is the “faith once delivered” by Christ through his apostles to the church. That gospel is a like priceless wedding dress or vintage diamond ring. However tarnished, it’s a treasure worth preserving. For that reason, I find the language of deconstruction unhelpful. It focuses so heavily on what needs to go that it is prone to dishonor what must remain.



I'll speak frankly now, without metaphors. I have watched dear friends deconstruct their faith so thoroughly that they not only moved on from toxic religion—they abandoned Jesus as husband as well, as if they'd never given themselves to him. They ditched their ugly retributive theology, but then discarded the gospel too, proving right their accusers who cried "slippery slope." If their exodus from Christianity results in greater love and freedom, the detox might be worth it. But how is it that so many make the transition without the transformation? If we retain the very self-righteous and hateful posture that drove us from un-Christlike religion in the first place, what exactly have we deconstructed?

So my advice is this: Slow down. Critique your language, your tone, your metaphors. Keep close watch for your own hidden assumptions and power plays. Ephraim of Syria prayed, "O Lord and King, grant me to see my own transgressions, and not to judge my brother"—difficult, but loving correction need not condemn the erring other. Fix your eyes on Christ, who authored your faith to begin with and who alone can ultimately perfect it. Yes, learn to let things go, but leave the sledge hammer in the shed. Debate the demerits of un-Christlike doctrine and practice—but please, don't throw the baby out with the bathwater. □

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Coming Soon!

A CWR Press sequel to

Brad Jersak's

A More Christlike God



After Deconstruction...

"It is the step out of philosophical deconstruction and into action that I find problematic. ... as a detour, I think deconstruction is more or less indispensable for all disciples. We should all have our day in the desert, our retreat in the deconstructive klinger. But once we have fasted for forty days without food, water or shelter, there is somewhere else to go afterwards. That's important."

—Richard Kearney