

How to Navigate Doubts and Difficulties

Series: The Deconstruction Zone: Navigating Doubts and Difficulties
Brad Bailey & Josh Call – July 30, 2023

Intro (Brad) -

Today we are concluding our series called...The Deconstruction ZoneNavigating Doubts and Difficulties
At one level it's about the question...

What do we do when what we believe is true and good... doesn't seem so clear?

Began the series helping us see WHAT we are navigating...

Navigating Development: From childhood simplicity to adult complexity (and mystery)

Navigating Individuation: From the beliefs we received to a faith we own

Navigating Questions: Embracing doubt as a means (not an end)

Navigating Disappointment: From initial trust to reacting to hypocrisy and harm

We need to create space for discernment

Navigating Cultural Influence: Discerning truth amidst the current social beliefs, values, and pressures that surround us

Then for the past 4 weeks, engaged **some core ideas amidst our current culture...** that **can become ...** that are too often left unengaged.

- **Aren't We Better Off Without Religion?**
- **What About Hypocrisy and Abuse?**
- **Is Christian Belief Rational?**
- **Isn't Christianity Homophobic?**

Today...concluding with some practical ways to navigate such a process...how God may speak to us about
How to Navigate Doubts and Difficulties

Faith is more dynamic than simply a set of beliefs that we master....

It's about following the life and teachings of Jesus.

If we stand back and realize what we are engaging.... It is he who represents the source of all life... announcing that we have been living in separation... darkened understanding... gone astray... and he is declaring what is true and good.

Our journey is one of moving through life ...and moving towards that unchanging truth.

And this helps us appreciate that what following Jesus is defined by is a "disciple"

The noun disciple comes from the Latin word discipulus, which means "student, learner, or follower."

Disciple is a learner ...so we are always in process... which does not mean truth changes

As I said the first week: *I believe that...*

God wants us to create a space wide enough to navigate ...but with guideposts that keep us from finding ourselves stuck on the side of the road.

So the **road should be wide enough** for our living with **some mystery...** some space to navigate...but also some guideposts...to keep us from just swerving off and finding ourselves stuck on the side of the road.

Maybe something doesn't make sense and we need clarity... maybe a source along the way hasn't been trustworthy...and we need more discernment... but maybe we do understand what Jesus is saying...and it's just not popular... or it's personally changing.

So today we are going to **conclude offering a few practical points on...**

How to Navigate Doubts and Difficulties

(This is close at heart for both Josh Call and I... and so we are going to each share in some points about what God has brought to mind for us.). Welcome Josh...

1. Face our questions... but also our hearts. (Josh)

As I've been talking with friends this week about how I'd be going up on Sunday and sharing the stage with Pastor Brad, they asked, "Well how exactly is that gonna work?"

For me, I think of each of these points that we're gonna be trading off as practical tools in the toolbelt of someone navigating this deconstruction process, either their own, or a friend, colleague, relative, loved one. So if you're sitting here thinking, "I'm not deconstructing! This doesn't hold any value for me," I want to remind you that we are right now moving into a world that is increasingly post-deconstruction. And as we seek to fulfill the Great Commission in our friend groups and families and communities, I think that these tools can serve us in engaging people who maybe were raised Christian, or used to identify as Christian, or aren't sure what they believe with regard to the claims of Christianity.

So the first tool in our toolbelt is to face our questions — but also our hearts.

Face our questions — but also our hearts

I think that God has given human beings a mind that reflects his — a rational mind, a creative mind. And I think with that comes an invitation to investigate the doubts and the questions that arise with respect to heaven and God and why we're here. I firmly believe that there are good, solid, sturdy answers that can help bolster our faith as we seek after God.

But what's fascinating is, two people can approach the same set of facts, and still walk away with wildly differing perspectives on what they've seen. One person might look through a telescope and say, "It's impossible that in all the vastness of the universe, there is a personal God who cares about me," while the next person looks through the same telescope and says, "Wow, I don't know you could see the vastness and the beautiful complexity of the universe and not believe."

And I think the distinction really comes down to a difference, not of mind but of heart. I think that just as important as facing my questions and doubts about God head-on, is facing head-on my own internal desires and motivations. To ask myself, "What answer do I want to find?"

Do I want to validate my doubts about Christianity and the Bible, so I can pursue the pleasures that would otherwise make me feel guilty?

Do I want to validate the existence of a holy and personal God to whom I am accountable for how I live my life?

Because more often than not, I think we end up finding what we're looking for. And if we miss this vital step of listening for the posture of our heart, we can very naturally end up finding the books and lectures and podcasts that validate our biases rather than engaging fairly with views that support and challenge our own. What comes out as a rational, well-articulated rebuttal of Christian beliefs often doesn't start there. Often it starts at the heart — "I don't want to believe. I don't want to live my life being accountable to God. I don't want this." And the rational argument becomes this sword that I can use to fend off the Christians who come along and try to evangelize me.

In his letter to the Ephesians, the apostle Paul said of the Gentiles: "They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts." [Eph. 4:18] Notice the order of events in this verse — (a) the hardening of hearts, (b) leads to the ignorance of God, (c) leads to darkened understanding and separation from the life of God. So if you're the person who is in this deconstruction process, and you're saying, "I just want answers, man! I want my rational intellect to be satisfied," the apostle Paul would tell you that if your heart is already hard, there is no rational answer, no logical proof that will satisfy.

As a final note, and I'll hand this off to Pastor Brad in just a second, another question that I think is worth asking to gauge where my heart is, is this. If I found out that the God of the Bible was undeniably, irrefutably real, would I give my life to him? Would I serve him?

Because if the answer is "No," then this isn't a question of evidence or proof or anything else. It's a matter of my heart being turned away from God so that I will not turn and follow him, no matter what.

2. Identify what the conflict is...and isn't. (Brad)

When we face a question... a difficult issue... we are usually struck by a broad connection... but generally... we haven't really become clear on what the real problem is until we look more closely.

If someone saw that people can get really sick from food they eat...they could think that food is a problem. But when looked at more closely... it's found that it is a bacteria that can develop in otherwise good food. So we learn how to avoid the develop of dangerous bacteria.

That is the same for the process of identifying what we may see as a problem with beliefs.

Going back to the question: **Aren't we better off without religion?**

At a distance...one can see violence in the name of religion... people flew planes into buildings on 9/11,,, So one could just accept the broad association... try to live without any beliefs about transcendent truth... (but it could prove no more wise than not eating food)...

What helps...is to look... more carefully and closely

More closely... tends to be clashes of power... more a clash of **cultural or ethnic control of places and power.** (religion is just a way to differentiate the beliefs of each group's identity....or to add justification,,, but it's not the primary cause.

And if we look at secular cultures... we see the same.

So the problem is human abuse of power and violence...which transcends religion.

And it can be **wise to look more widely as well...** to see if the association is consistent.

(Look at other people eating food.)

And here will find that Jesus confronted the whole nature of power and violence.

He brought a new way into the world.

Step back...and you will a world that was resigned to embedded hierarchy of value... and the brutality of force and violence ... until the life and teachings of Jesus.

What Jesus taught that began to reshape the western world in particular [1]

- **Christianity declared that every life was sacred... created by God to reflect God.**
- **The early Christians were the first ones to take babies left outside the city to die... and adopt them.**
- **Christianity created the founding vision for hospitals...with it's call to care for the sick.**
- **Christianity provided the foundation for science ... declaring creation has been given order for us to manage.**
- **Christianity was the most powerful force in abolishing slavery.**
- **Christianity transformed the vision of ruling over others to that of the responsibility of governing for the good of all.**

- **It was Christians and Christian-shaped nations ... who responded to the famines across Africa.**
- **It was Christians and Christian-shaped nations ... who responded to the AIDS crisis devastating Africa.**

And

In America...

- **The majority of agencies working with refugees are Christian. [2]**
- **The largest proportion of social workers self-identify as Christians. [3]**
- **Local congregations provide 130,000 alcohol recovery programs**
- **Local congregations provide 120,000 programs to help the unemployed**
- **Local congregations provide 26,000 active ministries to those living with HIV/AIDS.**
- **Local congregations provide or partner in 150,000 sites providing food for those in need... which has risen since the pandemic. [4]**

If one looks ...they will see that it is dominantly **Christians and Christian shaped nations** that have brought the **most response to human needs.**

(Can take time to compare with the most secular nations... with least Christian worldview.)

The many works of the church that are rarely noted.

Add one more...

Those who are most engaged in church continue to be found to be happier and live longer. [5]

Identify what the conflict is...and isn't.

3. Don't let personal political positions become issues of faith (Josh)

Over the past few years, as I've grown more open about my faith among my secular friends — and especially since accepting the Youth Ministry role here at Westside, I've had a few times where friends have turned cold toward me or cut me off altogether because of my being openly Christian.

And what's interesting is, the hostility that I've experienced generally isn't associated directly with the teachings of Christ and of the Bible, but with political beliefs that these people assume that I hold because they associate them with Christians. [4b]

So that's tool number 3 — don't let personal political perspectives become issues of faith.

I find it really interesting that often people in the non-religious world associate Christians first and foremost with a political ideology. I was talking with a buddy the other day, and he said "I don't really like that religious crowd — it breeds bad takes and extremism."

But looking from the inside, Christians run the gamut politically. I have dear godly Christian friends who are openly socialist on one side, and I have... Gwen Call on the other side. And people aligned with either side politically can point to Jesus and the Bible as the basis for why they believe what they believe! For why they side with one side over the other.

The Christian on one side might say, "I see the way the Bible upholds the traditional family unit, the dignity it places on human life, and the emphasis on personal morality — I'm gonna vote for this party!"

While the person on the other side says, "Look at the special care that God shows to immigrants and to the poor and marginalized. Look at how Jesus elevates the role of women — I'm gonna line up with that political movement!"

So as believers, when we witness to somebody and we say to them, "This is who Jesus is.

This is why you need to accept him as your Savior — and also accept my beliefs about Donald Trump or vaccines or whatever else," we place an unnecessary stumbling block in the way of the Gospel. By the time you get to the Good News of Jesus, odds are they've already tuned out.

The thing is — and I say this as someone who pays a lot of attention to politics, and I'm pretty loyal to my team — neither party's platform is perfectly lined up with godliness. There is deep corruption and moral failure in Washington (and Sacramento), whether you're left, right or center. And when I place demands that a real Christian holds this perspective, or votes this way, not only am I invalidating the faith of every Christian who falls on the other side of this issue, but I'm also saying to every unsaved person on the other side of the political fence, "Christianity isn't for you. Christianity is for everyone who believes in Jesus — except for socialists. Except for QAnon."

I feel like things got really ramped up in 2020 with COVID and the lockdowns and people going stir-crazy in their houses, on top of a contentious election season. We're gonna be going into another election year pretty soon, and I'm really worried about the way things are gonna escalate.

I don't mean on Fox News or MSNBC — I mean Christians. In 2020, I heard a Christian friend of mine — a good man, a godly man — say that he didn't think Christians could be Democrats. And it made me really sad to hear him say that. To hear how his heart had grown cold to the people on the other side.

And I think it is a warning to all of us — how easy it is for me to place conformity over unity, and to allow my heart to grow cold toward people with a different politics from me.

The apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians wrote that he became all things to all people in order to advance the Gospel, that the saving power of Jesus would be experienced by Jews and non-Jews alike. And I don't think that means that you can just slap Jesus onto whatever ideology you want and call it godly. But what I do think is that the best parts of a liberal worldview — the value of women, the care for refugees and the poor and defenseless — are reflective of the heart of Christ. And the best parts of a conservative worldview — the value of family and tradition, of justice and personal morality — those are reflective of the heart of Christ as well.

So if I can build a bridge for the Gospel through politics, awesome. But if all I can do is build a wall because I don't see eye to eye with my conservative uncle or my liberal cousin, stay away from it. And remember the value of unity over conformity.

4. Value Truth in Love... because separation will lead to unfruitful places (Josh)

And that brings me to the fourth tool in the toolbelt — value truth in love, because separation leads to unfruitful places.

You know, in some ways, it would be easier if we all believed the same thing. If Pastor Brad came up one day and said, “We’re a conservative church,” or “We’re a liberal church,” and everybody who disagrees leaves, and more people start coming who fit into that box. But when we try to fit together in the box with people who we *aren’t* quite lined up with in our politics or our theological positions, that’s when we start to bump elbows with each other.

I had an unofficial group with some friends a few years back where we would come together every couple weeks and bat around tough Bible questions. We called it **Wrestling Club**, and sometimes people would come in with strong positions on opposing sides of a question. And the hardest part would be at the end of an hour, being willing to walk away from the table in disagreement — but loving and respecting the other person. Still valuing the shared community we had together.

And I think for help in navigating encounters like these, or as we engage others in our community who might be in this deconstruction process, we look back to Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. **“Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.” [Eph. 4:15]**

Notice the image of unity in that verse. Believers, working together with our unique gifts in our unique roles, form the body of Christ on earth. And just touching briefly on the politics thing again, I think maybe the different political sides we might fall on has to do with our different roles in the body of Christ. God may have given *this* person a real heart for justice issues, and given *that* person might be called to fight for the unborn. **Just a thought.**

But he uses this phrase, **“speaking the truth in love”** to describe the way that believers ought to build one another up. And these two values — truth and love — aren’t quite in *opposition* with one another, but they are in tension together. And I think that we can end up emphasizing one to the exclusion of the other, and that can do real damage to the way we grow in community and the way we outreach to people who don’t yet know God.

I think perhaps the easier error is to emphasize love at the expense of truth. I think people like this can be wonderful people who value inclusion and community. But then maybe there’s a sin issue that they’ll notice in somebody’s life, or someone will ask questions about some of the hard truths of the faith, and this person might feel the urge to back away from the truth in order not to offend or make someone feel called-out.

But sin is like cancer in someone’s life, and the hard truths of the Gospel — about heaven and hell and salvation in Jesus alone — are like medicine to a dying world. So if a doctor decided not to tell his patient about her cancer because he didn’t want to upset her, or if he were to withhold medicine because it tastes bad — we’d say that’s a terrible doctor! And in the same way, I think that in order to love people we *must* stand on truth.

The second error — the error that I personally am more susceptible to — is valuing truth *over* love. I had a friend once argue to me that speaking the truth *is* love, and I totally disagreed. If speaking the truth *is* love, then you’d never be able to use the truth to hurt somebody. But often the most painful thing that someone can say to you is rooted in the truth. **You want to hurt me? You tell me I have little ears.**

But seriously, it’s something that the Lord has really convicted me about in the past couple of weeks, that I’ll catch myself wanting to win the argument rather than win the person. I’ll catch myself having a lot less grace for other people than the Lord had for me when he was drawing me out of the worldly way that I was living, six or seven years ago.

So whether you end up lining up more with me, or if you’re more on the ‘love’ side of the equation, I think that in order to fulfill our role of advancing the Gospel of Christ, **we *have to be able to hold both of these at once. Truth in love.***

5. Understand that the problem with “judgmentalism” is that our story is too small...and we are playing the wrong part. (Brad)

A primary challenge for so many... is feeling there is something wrong with the a “judgmental” posture that seems so inherent to the Christian Faith.

There is a sense that the Christianity has become that which primarily creates enemies to judge... where compassion is lost...and it repels people...including ourselves.

Sounds off...and we may tend to assume that the problem is judgment itself....we want to get rid of any judgment...or have less of it.

We do well to consider that the problem is that we have made the story too small...and placed ourselves in the wrong position.

What do I mean?

Across the spectrum of moral issues... Christians have naturally wanted to speak for what their perspective may be.

And in the end...**what is heard** is that **all those involved in some practices are bad.**

That's a **small story**...and it's **not really good news.**

The **larger story** is that there is **goodness behind the whole world**...and it is personal...and that **personal source has come for us...and has GRACE.**

And we are not in the position to be judges...but to tell about finding grace.

The good news is realizing our sin...and finding God's grace.

People don't line up to be judged...especially by fellow sinners. Judgment is a terrible evangelism strategy. If you want to keep being ineffective at reaching unchurched people, keep judging them.

Jesus was quite clear... judgment exists... but he has come not to condemn...because we already are condemned...he has come as the answer...the good news.

Paul also reminds us to drop the uppity-attitude; that none of us were saved by the good we did but by grace.

Paul said he was the chief of sinners...and he said... that the essence of sin is thinking we are good enough... that we are in the position of God to define and resolve the problem.

And here is how I discovered grace...amazing grace.

Notes:

1. Far more can be said of the influence of Jesus... and the Judeo-Christian worldview. This is not to imply that other cultures did not have values which added to virtues such as hospitality, or learning such as science. The point is that revealing that a God created the world with order..... was a shift from the pagan cultures...as was the inherent value of every life by way of the Creator rather than the State. These and other revelations...are foundational to western civilization.

2. There are [nine national voluntary agencies](#) that work directly with the government, six of which are faith based: One is Jewish, one Catholic, one evangelical Christian and three are mainline Protestant. These groups arrange for refugees to find housing, land jobs and enroll in English classes. They [do so regardless of the newcomers' own religions](#) or their [countries of origin](#).

See: **American religious groups have a history of resettling refugees – including Afghans**

Published: August 26, 2021 - <https://theconversation.com/american-religious-groups-have-a-history-of-resettling-refugees-including-afghans-166628>

While the United States has historically led the world in refugee resettlement numbers, admissions fell dramatically under President Donald Trump, whose administration increased vetting procedures and reduced the number of refugees accepted annually to record lows.

3. The largest proportion of social workers self-identify as Christian – drawn from:

https://www.nacsw.org/Publications/SWC/SWC44_3Sample.pdf

4. Some stats from 2016 PEW study; see: <https://www.deseret.com/faith/2021/5/...>

Regarding food distribution: Nearly half of all churches and other faith institutions help people get enough to eat

Published: October 28, 2021 - <https://theconversation.com/nearly-half-of-all-churches-and-other-faith-institutions-help-people-get-enough-to-eat-170074>

This data indicates that in 2018, [48% of U.S. congregations](#) either had their own food-distribution program or supported efforts run by another organization, such as a [food bank](#) or food pantry. That's over 150,000 congregations.

This [article](#) states that 53 million people turned to food banks, food pantries and meal programs for help in 2021, one-third more than prior to the pandemic.

4b. Among the top issues that have caused younger lives to step away from Christian faith... is the The Acceptance of Political Idolatry and Conspiracy Theories in Christian Communities

"It's difficult to put into words how discouraging it can be to watch the very people who taught you the value of discernment fall into conspiratorial rabbit holes or succumb to inflammatory misinformation. Or, as [Carey wrote in a blog post](#), "When Christians lose their minds, people lose their faith."

5. Researchers have shown, for example, that Americans who regularly attend religious services tend to live longer.¹ - Idler, Ellen, John Blevins, Mimi Kiser, and Carol Hogue. 2017. "[Religion, a social determinant of mortality? A 10-year follow-up of the Health and Retirement Study.](#)" PLoS One

See also: JANUARY 31, 2019

Religion's Relationship to Happiness, Civic Engagement and Health Around the World

In the U.S. and other countries, participation in a congregation is a key factor -

<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2019/01/31/religions-relationship-to-happiness-civic-engagement-and-health-around-the-world/#:~:text=Recently%2C%20scholars%20have%20applied%20more,able%20to%20cope%20with%20stress.>

Is the dramatic global rise in unhappiness correlated with the continued drop in church attendance?

[ANALYSIS SMALLORY CHALLIS | FEBRUARY 24, 2023 - https://baptistnews.com/article/is-the-dramatic-global-rise-in-unhappiness-correlated-with-the-continued-drop-in-church-attendance/](#)

Key Findings From the Global Religious Futures Project

DECEMBER 21, 2022 - <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/12/21/key-findings-from-the-global-religious-futures-project/>

Is Religion Traumatic for Kids? New Data Suggests Otherwise

by [W. Bradford Wilcox](#), [@BRADWILCOXIFS](#) [Riley Peterson](#) AUGUST 4, 2022

<https://ifstudies.org/blog/is-religion-traumatic-for-kids-new-data-suggests-otherwise>