

Introduction

Why do some people leave the faith after a crisis of faith while others have their faith strengthened during that same crisis? Why is so-called “deconstruction” destructive for some but constructive for others?

You may have heard the term before. It is rarely used in its original context. The term “deconstruction” was used by Jacques Derrida as a method of literary criticism. The word criticism here means disciplined study. In short—very short—deconstruction is a method of literary criticism that “takes apart” an author’s words in order to construct his meaning. Very few people today who speak of deconstruction do so in a literary context.

For many the word conjures up images of people leaving behind the Christian faith. For some reason they have come to the determination that they no longer believe its core tenets. They have “taken apart” its core claims and find themselves unable to construct it in a manner they can believe. For still others they take apart the faith they were taught, often in “Christian” homes, and discover that what they were taught was not authentic Christianity but a syncretized blend of American civil religion sprinkled with claims of God’s blessing and dressed in a tunic that, if you squint, vaguely looks like a tunic Jesus might have worn.

There are those who will argue over the meaning of this word. I love words but given Jacques Derrida refused to give a succinct summary of what it means, I’m not particularly interested in that debate. I find it quite tedious. What I find immensely interesting is the process that people go through in sifting through they various things they’ve been taught, whether about God or the Bible in general or Scripture passages in particular or about the church’s role in the world, and they begin to recognize error that has crept in among the truth. The process of sorting it all out can be painful and can take a lifetime. Sometimes, however, the sifting is immediate and it takes a lifetime to work out all the change. We see this in the apostle Paul’s life. We’re in Ephesians 3.

^{Eph 3:1} For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles— ² assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God’s grace that was given to me for you, ³ how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly. ⁴ When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, ⁵ which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit. ⁶ This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

Ephesians 3:1–6

For This Reason

In verse 1 Paul begins a thought, then interrupts his own thought to make another point. He won't return to his original thought until verse 14. He says, "For this reason". Eventually he's going to pray for the Ephesians believers, which we will look at in a couple weeks. In his "interruption" he's seeking to explain something about his current status.

Paul writes this letter from prison. He has written incredible things in the first half of this letter. He's expressed the glorious gospel of Jesus. He has declared all that God has done in Christ through his Spirit. He has written of the complete and total victory of Christ over sin and death and over hostile spiritual forces that seek only to harm and destroy. You may recall how, in chapter 1, Paul stumbled over his words and kept piling them up in order to try to express how much greater Jesus' power and authority is over every rule and authority and power and dominion, and over every name that is named.

The victory of Christ is *total*. There is no one who stands a chance in opposition to Jesus. There is no place one can go to evade the rule and authority of Jesus. While there are pockets of resistance, it is only a matter of time before the full authority of Jesus is recognized. Why, then, if the victory of Christ is so vast and so complete, is Paul writing this letter from a Roman prison?

Notice what Paul says. Yes, he is a prisoner and yes, he is in a Roman prison, but Paul is not a prisoner of Rome. He, Paul, is a prisoner *of Jesus Christ*. Paul understands his life is ultimately in the Lord's hands. Yes, there are pockets of resistance to the reign of Christ in which men and women remain in stubborn rebellion against him, yet Paul is in the Lord's hands. Even though the Lord Jesus is allowing a measure of suffering for Paul, he remains in control at all times.

There were many new believers in Ephesus who had come to faith in the five years or so since Paul last visited. They likely do not know him. They would have questions about why the holy apostle of the Lord Jesus is suffering as he is so Paul, out of pastoral concern for them, assures them he is in good hands, even if evil hands strike him. He is not in prison because of criminal behavior. He is not in prison because he is not a true apostle. He is not in prison because God has rejected him as an apostle. He is not in prison because Christ's cosmic rule is a complete and utter failure.

Paul understands he is right where the Lord has him, and the Lord remains with him, *even as the Lord does not approve of the suffering he is experiencing*. The Lord himself was the recipient of the single greatest act of injustice in history. As the apostle Peter declared on the day of Pentecost, Jesus was delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God and yet was killed *by the hands of sinful men*. Paul also knows that God raised him from the dead because it was not possible for death to hold him.

Paul pushes his point even further. Not only is he in a Roman prison but as a prisoner *of Jesus Christ*, he is in prison "on behalf of you Gentiles". It is because of Paul's love for and service to the nations that he has been imprisoned.

Remember what he has just written. The ancient world was filled with ethnic hostility. The Jews looked down on the nations for being uncircumcised and the nations looked down on the Jews for being circumcised. The people of Israel had come to believe they were in every way superior to the nations for having been chosen by God to be the people through whom the Messiah would come.

Paul made it very clear in chapter 2 that while the Gentiles had been, at one time, completely separated from Christ and separated from God's covenant people and had no hope in the world, the work of God in Christ was to destroy the barrier between them and not merely add Gentiles to Israel. Instead, the Lord Jesus came "to create one new man" out of the two groups. Together, Jews and Gentiles who believe in Jesus, comprise a completely new thing: the church.

God has reconciled both Jew and Gentile in one body and so has created peace. The Ephesians, who were mostly Gentiles, were no longer aliens and strangers but fellow citizens and members of the household of God. It is for this incredibly good news that Paul is suffering in a Roman prison as a prisoner of Jesus Christ, not of Rome.

On Behalf of the Gentiles

In verse 2 Paul reminds them of the "stewardship" that was given to him. Gentiles who trust in Jesus are fellow members of God's household. As an apostle, Paul is a steward of God's household. It isn't Paul's household; Paul was given responsibility to oversee God's household. This responsibility was given to him for their benefit, he says.

He says the mystery was made known to him by revelation. He means that time Jesus appeared to him. Keep in mind the circumstances of that encounter. Paul was a faithful Jew and was a Pharisee. Even as a young man he was climbing the ranks among the Pharisees and had Jesus not interrupted him that day, Paul likely would have become a leader of great power among the people of Israel.

As a Pharisee, Paul believed the Lord would fulfill his promises when and only when all Israel was faithful to the law of Moses. Like most Jews in the first century he believed the claim of the letter of Aristeas that had completely come to dominate Jewish thinking.

Now our Lawgiver being a wise man and specially endowed by God to understand all things, took a comprehensive view of each particular detail, and fenced us round with impregnable fortifications and walls of iron, that we might not mingle at all with any of the other nations, ~~but remain pure in body and soul, free from all vain imaginations, worshiping the one Almighty God above the whole creation.~~

Letter of Aristeas 139

Prior to meeting Christ Paul believed this. On that particular day he was traveling to Damascus seeking to arrest Jewish Christians for they were claiming the Messiah had been crucified. In Paul's mind this was blasphemy for he believed God would never reject his Messiah like this. He believed he had to wipe out this blasphemy for until all Israel kept the law of Moses, God would not fulfill his promises to Israel.

In his mind those promises centered on Israel being elevated above the nations. He believed the people of Israel were superior to the nations and when all Israel obeyed the law—that impregnable fortification with its walls of iron!—they would have power and authority over the nations. They would dominate the nations. They would not, of course, *mingle* with the nations, for that would make them unclean.

Then Jesus met Paul. He stopped his plan to arrest and harm believers in Damascus and did so by transforming his heart. Then he revealed to a man named Ananias what his plans for Paul were:

Acts 9:15 But the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. ¹⁶ For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.”

Acts 9:15–16

Imagine believing your entire life you were superior to those of other nations. Imagine believing your entire life that your God-given destiny was to prove your superiority over those other nations. Imagine spending your entire life trying to keep yourself “pure” by not mixing with those other nations. Then the sovereign God who is Lord over all nations reveals to you that will represent him to those very nations and that you will suffer for it. Imagine having your heart so completely transformed that you no longer despise those other nations but love them and would gladly give your life for them. This is what happened to Paul. His entire understanding of the world stood completely dismantled, only to be put back together centered on who Jesus is and what he has done.

The Mystery of Christ

The Lord Jesus revealed to Paul that his plan from the beginning was to save men and women from every tribe and language and people and nation. He was not planning to save them and keep them separate. The law was never meant to be walls of iron to keep out the nations. Since that is what it had become, he simply fulfilled it and brought in a new covenant between God and his people. This new covenant means that all who are in Christ, whether Jew or Gentile, whether slave or free, whether male or female, are united together in one body. He says this is “the mystery” of Christ.

The word “mystery” doesn’t mean a whodunit sort of mystery. That’s our modern conception of the word. It also doesn’t mean mystery in the sense other religions used it in the first century. The cult of Artemis was a mystery cult. The Artemision right there in the city of Ephesus was the largest building in the ancient world. The cult of Artemis dominated the culture and the economy of the entire region.

It was a mystery cult because the teachings were not publicly available. They were given to those who were on the inside, so to speak. The more you committed to Artemis the more would be revealed. A modern day mystery cult is Scientology. You cannot reach out to the local Scientology office and just ask to review their teachings. If you want to know what Scientology really teaches you have to join the cult and begin paying money and progressing through their rituals.

After several years and hundreds of thousands of dollars, and assuming you *pass* the rituals, then you can, at even greater expense, learn more and more what the cult teaches. Of course, for just the cost of internet access you could also go to WikiLeaks and read their leaked documents. Because their teachings are not publicly available, Scientology is a mystery cult.

This is not what Paul is saying, however. What makes the mystery of Christ a mystery wasn't that it had to be figured out like Sherlock Holmes unraveling a crime scene and it wasn't that only those on the inside were allowed access to the knowledge. What makes it a mystery was that, while it was proclaimed, it wasn't understood. *Understanding* comes only by revelation.

New Testament scholar Clinton Arnold lists four ways it was not understood. First, the means by which God's purpose would be realized was a mystery. Paul, prior to meeting Christ, assumed that God's salvation would come by a conquering king who would defeat the nations in armed combat and through brute force conquer them and subjugate them. The Lord Jesus came instead as a servant and gave his life as a ransom for many. No one was expecting this even though the prophets spoke of the Suffering Servant.

Second, salvation for the Gentiles would come through the abrogation of the Mosaic law. Paul said in chapter 2 Christ "has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances". Hebrews tells us when the prophets spoke of the new covenant God would make with his people, this meant the old covenant—the Mosaic law—was passing away. It was a mystery because people didn't make this connection. It was hidden in plain sight!

Third, it was a mystery because the manner in which God's purpose would be realized was unexpected. Specifically, Christ came to be our peace and broke down the dividing wall of hostility so that believing Jews and Gentiles would be incorporated into one new body, the church. The people of Israel had long assumed the nations would just come to embrace circumcision and the law *and join Israel*. They didn't see the emergence of this "one new man in place of the two" and they didn't see the reconciliation in one body.

Finally, it was a mystery because the extent of nearness to God available in the new covenant far exceeds that of the old covenant. The old covenant was glorious for it brought God's presence among his people, first in the tabernacle, then in the temple. No other nation could claim to have God in their midst the way Israel could. Of course, only the high priest and only on the Day of Atonement could actually enter directly into God's presence. In the new covenant we experience the presence of God and we enter directly and immediately into his presence every time we assemble in his name.

Paul says this mystery wasn't made known to previous generations. They had no understanding of what was coming. Only in Christ is the brilliance of God's plan fully revealed.

The Problem

In verse 6 Paul defines the mystery of Christ very succinctly: this mystery is that the Gentiles—believers from any nation—are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. And it is this declaration that is the reason Paul was a prisoner of the Lord Jesus on behalf of the Gentiles.

We see this more clearly in the book of Acts. Remember the incredible transformation Paul experienced when Jesus revealed himself to him. Paul realized that the things he was clinging to for his meaning and purpose, his very identity, were actually worthless. This is what he meant in his letter to the Philippians. He once took great pride in being a Jew, for he was raised the right way: he was circumcised on the eighth day. He was no mere convert to Judaism; he was a flesh-and-blood Jew, born to faithful parents.

Further, he was a Hebrew of Hebrews and a Pharisee. He was so zealous for the law of Moses he persecuted those who blasphemed God by claiming the Messiah had been crucified. When it came to righteousness under the law Paul could declare with confidence he was *blameless*. Then he discovered none of it impressed the Lord Jesus. The Lord was seeking *faith*, not ethnic identity, not personal accomplishment, not anything else. Just faith.

This revelation radically changed Paul and so he left all that behind and went to the Gentiles to preach the gospel of Jesus to them, assuring them they, too, could join the people of God by faith and not by cultural assimilation into Judaism.

In Acts 21 Paul travels to Jerusalem. He met with James, who was the lead elder in the church there. He shared with the elders of the Jerusalem church all God had been doing among the Gentiles, how they were coming to faith in the Messiah, the Savior of the world. James shared some concerns, however.

James tells Paul how many *thousands* of Jews had come to believe in Jesus but were also still zealous for the law. He says, “They have been told about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them to not circumcise their children or walk according to our customs.” Their customs are their long-established practices.

Keep in mind that when Jesus offered himself as the sacrifice of the new covenant, the old covenant given at Sinai was fulfilled. It was no longer binding on God’s people for they had a new covenant. This doesn’t mean they could just go along and violate the law of Moses, because while the specific commandments were no longer binding, God hadn’t changed. The entire point of the law was to live in accord with God’s character. As we’ve seen, murder isn’t wrong because the sixth commandment says it is. Murder is wrong because God is the sort who would never take a life unjustly.

If a person lives in accord with God’s character as revealed in Christ, that person is, in fact, fulfilling the law of Moses, even if he or she doesn’t adhere to the standards of ritual purity or food laws or Sabbath-keeping. This is because the commandments about food and ritual purity and such were fulfilled in Christ. Christ is the one who makes a person clean, not some ritual and not specific foods that are avoided. The law’s purpose was to teach God’s people they needed to be made clean, not that there was something magical about avoiding specific foods.

The problem for Paul is the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem were hearing that he was teaching that all Jewish Christians should stop being *Jewish*. James said they were hearing that Paul was telling them to not walk according to their customs. To prove he was not opposed to *Jewish culture*, Paul purified himself according to Jewish customs and went into the temple. Then we read this:

Acts 21:27 When the seven days were almost completed, the Jews from Asia, seeing him in the temple, stirred up the whole crowd and laid hands on him, ²⁸ crying out, “Men of Israel, help! This is the man who is teaching everyone everywhere against the people and the law and this place. Moreover, he even brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place.” ²⁹ For they had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian with him in the city, and they supposed that Paul had brought him into the temple.

Acts 21:27–29

If Jewish believers had heard these things about Paul, surely unbelieving Jews had as well. They began to cause trouble for Paul.

Brought Near

The truth is Paul had not taken Trophimus—a Gentile—into the temple but Paul also knew that Trophimus, because he believed in Jesus, had been brought nearer to God than even that nearness found in the temple. Trophimus, because he was in Christ *as a Gentile*, was regularly and routinely in the Most Holy Place, for in the new covenant God is nearer to his people than he had ever been under the Mosaic covenant. In other words, though Trophimus never set foot in the temple proper, he had entered directly into God’s presence in a more profound way than any Jew who was clinging to the law of Moses.

Even though Paul had not violated temple law by taking Trophimus into the physical temple, he was arrested by the authorities and beaten. After a lengthy prison stay and various trials in and around Jerusalem, Paul was shipped off to Rome as a prisoner to stand trial before Caesar. He was in prison in Rome—as a prisoner of the Lord Jesus—for two whole years.

Think of the real reason Paul was hated by the Jews. He was claiming God’s Messiah would welcome all who came to him in faith and place them alongside all who trusted him, regardless of national origin, *as equals*. This means those who did not adhere to Jewish customs and practices were at no disadvantage and those who did adhere to Jewish customs and practices were at no advantage. Look at what he wrote to the Corinthians.

^{1 Cor 7:19} For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God.

1 Corinthians 7:19

Paul is saying that whether you are circumcised according to the law of Moses or you are not, it doesn’t count *for anything*. It’s like saying you have light brown hair and she has dark brown hair. Sure, your hair is different, but *the difference doesn’t matter*. It doesn’t count for anything. Neither light brown hair nor dark brown hair suggests a difference in status or in faithfulness.

Remember the ethnic slur the Jews would cast at Gentile men that we saw in chapter 2 verse 11. Gentile men were called “foreskins” because they were uncircumcised. Jews thought they were superior for having had theirs removed when they were just eight days old. Paul says it doesn’t count *for anything!*

Then he says what does count: keeping the commandments of God. The Jews were *commanded* to circumcise their children on the eighth day, so keeping *that* commandment doesn’t count...but keeping the other commandments does count? Huh? To make sense of this we need to look at two other times Paul declares circumcision doesn’t count.

^{Gal 5:6} For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.

Galatians 5:6

Whether one is circumcised or uncircumcised counts for nothing; the thing that does count for something, however, is faith working through love. He writes something similar in the next chapter.

Gal 6:15 For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation.

Galatians 6:15

Throughout his letter to the Galatians he's been arguing that one does not need to embrace circumcision—and therefore the entire the law of Moses—as a way of life in order to faithfully follow Jesus. To say this another way, Gentiles who believe in Jesus may remain Gentiles, rooted entirely in their particular culture. The reason a Gentile can remain a Gentile and be a faithful follower of Jesus is because the thing that truly matters is the new creation.

That is, God in Christ has taken from Jew and Gentile and has begun his work of new creation by making one new man in place of the two. In Corinthians when he says what counts is keeping the commandments of God, he does not mean the law of Moses, but a life lived in accord with God's character. What counts is the work God does in transforming a person's heart and mind so that his or her life begins to reflect God's character. That's what the new creation is. That's the promise of the new covenant when God promised to write his law on the hearts of his people rather than on tablets of stone. It is the promise that you and I will be *transformed*.

Application

Paul, along with the other apostles and the early prophets in the church, were given insight into this mystery of Christ. God revealed in a fuller way to them what it means when Jesus declared, "This is the new covenant in my blood". The Gentiles—the nations—are adopted into the household of God along with Jews who trust in Christ are therefore adopted into that same household. This is why the gospel was so offensive. The two groups who hated each other are being made into one new kind of humanity: God's people. Even more offensive, neither has a greater claim to being God's people.

To say this is a monumental shift in Paul's thinking is an understatement. He had been a *proud* Jew who sought only for God to make Israel great again. This necessarily meant all other nations were beneath Israel. What Paul experienced on that day as he was traveling to Damascus where he would demonstrate his great righteousness by arresting Jewish Christians was a massive and immediate deconstruction. His entire conception of what it meant to be the people of God came crashing down.

For Paul everything that it meant to be God's people was tied up in his cultural expression and in his personal piety. He grew up in the right sort of family, with parents who were careful to obey Moses and circumcised Paul when he was just eight days old. He pursued the law of Moses as a student and became a Pharisee. His zeal for the law was so great he was advancing rapidly among the ranks, so to speak. He had become prominent even as a very young man that it was he who watched the stoning of Stephen and gave approval to it. Why was Stephen stoned to death? Here's what enraged the crowd:

Acts 7:51 “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you.⁵² Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered,⁵³ you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.”

Acts 7:51–53

Like Paul, their default assumption, their *self-identity*, was that of those who kept the law. The law is what made them superior to the nations. If they did not keep they law, they would be no different from any other nation—and that was offensive. Those who were witnesses to Stephen’s alleged blasphemy laid down their outer clothing at the feet of the young man named Saul, who would later go by his surname Paul. Acts specifically says he approved of this stoning.

His next few years were spent pursuing others like Stephen—Jewish men and women who dared claim the Messiah had been crucified. In such a short time Luke tells us he ravaged the church, entering house after house, dragging men and women to prison. In an instant, however, all this changed. Paul learned first hand that his self-constructed identity, that of being blameless according to the law and clinging to his heritage and family name and believing that his cultural expression was superior to all the other nations, was worthless. It didn’t count for anything.

What counted was the work the Lord Jesus did in his heart in an instant. Paul believed that the Christians were blaspheming by claiming the Messiah had been crucified, for if he had been, then God was rejecting his own Messiah. There was no doubt that Jesus of Nazareth had been crucified, but when he appeared to Paul in his glorified body, any doubts as to Jesus’ true identity were gone. Yes, he had been crucified, but God raised him from the dead.

Everything he had been clinging to suddenly disintegrated into dust. Here is how he explained it to the Philippians after detailing all the reasons he had for confidence in himself—including the righteousness he thought he had by the law:

Phil 3:7 But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ.
⁸ Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—¹⁰ that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death,

Philippians 3:7–10

Paul simply dismissed what had come before. All his worldly accomplishments, whether his ethnic identity or his elite status as a Pharisee or his education or his personal accomplishments, were nothing compared to his identity in Christ.

In an instant the Lord Jesus “deconstructed” Paul’s world by stripping away all the untruth he had been clinging to. He stripped away everything that had no value, everything

that counted for nothing. What he left Paul with is the very thing that leads some to deconstruct their inherited faith and construct in its place a true and vibrant faith. What he left was the Lord Jesus himself as the only means of true and lasting righteousness.

We all cling to the things we think give us value. It might be good health, but we all know how easily that can be stripped away. It might be your bank account, but we all know how quickly money can disappear. It might be pleasure, but we all know that pleasure is fleeting. It might be your personal accomplishments, the things you think make you somebody. These accomplishments might even be things you do for the Lord, thinking he somehow has great need of you. It might be your physical appearance or your popularity, your sense of self, your sexual identity, the sins you *don't* struggle with, your intellect, your spiritual giftedness, the time you spend reading the Bible and praying, how often you share the gospel of Jesus with your coworkers. All of it.

Paul discovered in an instant that none of that counts for anything. The truth is who you were—whether good or bad—doesn't count for anything. The truth is what you did—whether good or bad—doesn't count for anything. The truth is what you had—whether good or bad—doesn't count for anything. What counts is a new creation. What counts is the work God is doing in you as he transforms you into the man or woman he created you to be.

When we strip away all the false identities we give ourselves or the identities we are given by other people, we are better able to see Jesus. When we see Jesus, we see everything we need. If, in the process often called deconstruction, you lose Jesus, you lose everything. If, however, *everything else* is stripped away leaving only Jesus, then you finally have *everything*.