

The Apprenticeship Way Podcast

Episode 046

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A More Beautiful Deconstruction

Interview with Dr. Bradley Jersak

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Marc Schelske 0:00

Is deconstruction just a trendy word for backsliding or leaving Christianity? No. deconstruction is a necessary part of faith and how we think about it matters. Hey friends, I'm Marc Alan Schelske and this is the apprenticeship way, a podcast about spiritual growth following the way of Jesus. This is Episode 46. A more beautiful deconstruction.

TODAY'S SPONSOR

Today's podcast is sponsored by *The Wisdom Of Your Heart*. Imagine having two legs, two strong, healthy, functional legs, but then your parents and your teachers, maybe a pastor of the church who grew up in told you that in order to be a good person, a strong person, someone that really does what God wants, you need to only ever use one of those legs. Now you're a kid, you believe what trusted people tell you. And so you do it. You try living life on just one leg, you hop around, you end up sometimes losing your balance, you get pretty bruised up, but you know that you're doing what God wants. So you're being strong and good, even though sometimes you get hurt pretty badly or hurt other people around you.

This isn't a made up story. A lot of people who grew up Christian are living like this. Maybe it's you! Were you told that emotions are untrustworthy or immature are only capable of deception? Were you taught that good decision making, clear thinking, and even godly doctrine can never be influenced by emotion, by our feelings? Did some pastor tell you that empathy is a sin? Or maybe you experienced profound trauma that shut down your emotions or made your emotion swing wildly. Living like that is like trying to live with only one leg when you have two functional healthy legs. You're not using the tools God gave you. You're only going to end up hurting yourself and others.

If you've been trying to live like this--avoiding painful emotions, ignoring how you feel worried that your emotions are just temptations, or that if you really let yourself feel it will hurt just too much--then you might be greatly helped by my book, *The Wisdom Of Your Heart: Discovering the God-given Purpose and Power of your Emotions*. Your emotions are an essential part of who you are. Your emotions aren't bad or sinful. They're a vital source of information you need to live well. They are a God-given source of wisdom. *The Wisdom Of Your Heart* is available at all the online bookstores, and you can learn more about it or check it out at my website, www.TheWisdomOfYourHeart.com.

INTRODUCTION

If you've been following this podcast, you already know that we've been talking about a sea change that is occurring in the wider Christian conversation or at least the wider Western Christian conversation. People are evaluating their faith, their theology, what they've been taught. Many people across all

different traditions and denominations are taking their faith apart in a process that's come to be called deconstruction. These people are asking critical questions. What is it about my faith story that's dependable? What does it mean to say that scripture is true or trustworthy? Why does the behavior of so many Christian leaders and institutions contradict the teachings of Jesus? What do I do with the abuse or hurt that I have experienced or seen in the church and then the cover-ups? Are the lines of exclusion that I was raised with necessary? Some leaders, some pastors, think this trend is dangerous, leading people away from Christ. They see these questions as attacks on faith. Other leaders think that much of the work of deconstruction is just peeling away toxic and unhelpful interpretations and experiences. They see deconstruction is a kind of reformation.

A lot of us are in this place, trying to imagine what to do next. Some folks use the label Exvangelical. Some consider themselves post-denominational. Some say they're "spiritual-but-not-religious." Some of us have given up using the label Christian because it's taken on certain political and cultural associations that aren't true about who we are. And yet for many of us, Jesus still compels. His other centered co-suffering way seems good and true and beautiful and like God.

Recently, I was reading a book called *A More Christlike Way* by Dr. Bradley Jersak. It lays out a vision of a Christianity where everything in our faith and practice is rooted in the co-suffering, radically forgiving, compassionate love of Jesus--not just our actions, but also our beliefs, and even how we hold those beliefs. Now, Dr. Jersak is not afraid to take on sacred cows. In a previous book, *A More Christlike God*, he challenged some familiar ideas about the atonement, the idea that God kills Jesus in order to save us-- that's called penal substitutionary atonement. His most recent book, *A More Christlike Word*, takes apart the literalistic way we often read Scripture. In these books, Dr. Jersak is contributing to this evaluation of Christian faith that's happening. In that way, he's a part of the deconstruction discourse. In *A More Christlike Way*, Dr. Jersak talks directly about deconstruction, and suggested something that caught my eye and gave me a different way of thinking about all of this. So I asked if he would be willing to have a conversation with me about deconstruction.

Dr. Bradley Jersak is an author of multiple books. He's a professor of theology and the Dean of theology and culture at St. Stephen's University, New Brunswick. He serves as a reader and monastery preacher at an orthodox monastery, and he lives in Abbotsford, British Columbia with Eden his wife. Let's talk deconstruction.

INTERVIEW

Marc Schelske 5:30

So very early, in *A More Christlike Way*, you tackle the matter of deconstruction directly talk about it and you said something that caught my eye. I underlined it. I put a star by it, and then I came back to it months later: You said the impulse for deconstruction is necessary for spiritual survival, but the metaphor itself is fraught with violent undertones. So that's been rattling around my noggin. Something about deconstruction is good and necessary. And something about deconstruction, or at least this language that we're currently using, is violent and destructive. Do I have that right?

Dr. Bradley Jersak 6:28

Yeah, I'm not sure I have it right, though, you know, because in some ways, my heart in that book was to say, alternative metaphors actually affect how you approach your faith shift. So if you're going to use a word like deconstruction, that brings to mind like, burn it all down, blow it all up, that affects how you do

this. And our hearts deserve to be treated more tenderly than that. They often need healing, not a sledgehammer. Having said that, it's also not violent enough. In the in the language of Jesus, he doubles down, it is not burn it all down, it is die and rise again. If you think you're going to come in and just reform this old wine skin, you've not gone far enough. And I would say that's also true of deconstruction these days, in some ways, it's gone too far in shattering people's faith and lives and meaning. In other ways, it's sort of half-assed. Yeah, we need something that completely consumes what was and so I am of two minds on it in that sense, because I see both and going on.

Marc Schelske 7:44

This word may be new for some of us in Christian conversation. Where does this idea of deconstruction come from? What did it mean, then? How has the meaning changed?

Dr. Bradley Jersak 7:54

Oh, very good question. And so I you know, I don't want to be too prescriptive. I think language is descriptive. So I want to describe how it was used by Jacques Derrida, the philosopher when he coined it. And I want to be honest that it is used in a different way today but it is used, so it's part of our language. So first of all, Jacques Derrida came along and his idea of deconstruction was this: we need to slow down and be more mindful of how power dynamics insert themselves into our language. So for him, deconstruction was observing how we talk, how we talk to each other, and how in that talking, there's there's these power things at play, and we need to notice them. So that's what he was doing.

Now it's used in a completely different way. Today that's actually more modernistic. It's not even postmodern. It was more like Rene Descartes, it's radical doubt. And I'm just going to start dismantling my belief system, dismantling my faith. It's hard to stop then because you also end up disassembling you whole purpose of being alive. I get direct messages almost every day about that. "I started by deconstructing my toxic religious belief systems. But then I kind of found myself leaving Jesus. And now I don't even have meaning. I've deconstructed myself." Well, that's not what they're talking about, but it is a common occurrence these days. It's a popular use of the word. So what I want to do is say, using Derrida's sense, let's slow down and think about what we mean by deconstruction, and how it doesn't just describe what we're doing. The metaphors we use form how we do it. They form how careful or how sloppy that we are, they form who we listen to, and why, and so I think we want to spend the next time together deconstructing deconstruction in that sense and seeing its necessity, its perils and its possibilities.

Marc Schelske 9:57

Okay. So if we take a stance that we need to deconstruct how we use the word deconstruction, what does that mean? What are we implying, even maybe not realizing we're implying it, when we use the word the way it's commonly used now?

Dr. Bradley Jersak 10:13

So deconstruction, as it's commonly used today, tends to bring with it a kind of demolition vision, you know. For me, I see dynamite being placed at the bottom of the building and the whole thing crashing down. I see sledge hammers, smashing down walls, and so on. Now, there can be a place for that when you renovate a home, you might want to break walls down to open up space. You actually might need to remove an old building, in order to construct something that is healthier and not been condemned for habitation, right? So I don't want to be overly harsh about the demolition side of deconstruction. In In fact, I think it's necessary in some ways, and in some cases, but here's where we're too sloppy.

So we might say, Okay, we've got to demolish something, well, what? Are we saying we're demolishing the institution called church, okay. If you think we need to do that, tell me how you're doing it. You're probably not doing it. You're not doing that at all. We're just being skeptical about what the church was, and now we're going to leave it. On the other hand, maybe we're talking about burning down faith? Is that really what you want to do? You want to take an arsonist's torch to your faith? That seems like a harsh thing to do to your own heart. So I'm wanting to slow down and say, okay, demolish what? If we're going to demolish creepy belief systems and replace them with something, then let's have some suggestions.

So I would say Penal Substitutionary Atonement is a paganized version of atonement that actually needs demolition, it needs replacement. My suggestion is that we don't just make up our own, that we look at the historic Christian faith and say, all right, if we're going to deconstruct that, what shall we replace it with? I think I have a track record of being a deconstructionist In this sense, too, right? If we're going to say, you know, actually, Eternal Conscious Torment was a toxic doctrine based in literalizing certain images from scripture that has been totally unhelpful, and in fact, harmful, let's deconstruct it. Then I am talking about dismantling or razing something. But again, let's say what it does mean. How do we see this idea? And so I want to be careful in that sense.

Marc Schelske 12:43

What you just described makes me think of my experience this summer. My son and I resurfaced our deck. It was quite old. For many years, we kind of gotten it through by putting a thick coat of paint on top of it, you know, to hold everything together, but it was just starting to fall apart. And too many boards were dangerous. And so we went through the process to buy new decking, but then we had to take the old decking off. And in the process of taking the old decking off, we had to evaluate the structure underneath the decking that had been holding it up. There were structural members that were rotted out. There was a place where the deck was attached to the side of my house, where water was actually getting into the side of my house. And so we had to take it apart and evaluate what was going on under there and we discovered that some of what was in there wasn't good. It sounds like that's what you're talking about.

Dr. Bradley Jersak 13:36

Yeah, I think that's a magnificent example. Because I would, call that example, rather than deconstruction, maybe we would call it renovation. But here's the thing, what you noticed was sometimes when we're renovating our faith, as you're renovating your deck, be careful that you don't go too far and destroy structural members of your house that are required, but also make sure you go far enough, like don't just take the deck off and leave the rotten footing in place. And so I think this, again, it just calls for mindfulness.

Marc Schelske 14:15

Using a metaphor of renovation brings brings into the conversation the idea that we still have a positive destination in mind. We understand that something needs to change. We know that sometimes the changes may be surface, they may be small, we put new decking on that's visible, but there are also changes that are more central.

Dr. Bradley Jersak 14:43

And costly!

Marc Schelske 14:44

Right, exactly. We had to replace a structural member. We had to do some reconstructive surgery on the side of my house where water had been getting in for several years and that was unexpected. We didn't know we would find that. And when I found it, I kind of wanted to just cover it up and not think about it.

Dr. Bradley Jersak 14:59

I noticed in that, too, that what you did was to preserve your house. Right?

Marc Schelske 15:05

Exactly right.

Dr. Bradley Jersak 15:06

So let's say with Penal Substitution or Eternal Conscious Torment, I'm wanting to say I'm addressing these things directly, in order to preserve the precious structure beneath it, which was Christian faith.

Marc Schelske 15:18

Yeah, the house of the Christian faith means something. And behind that, I think the character of God, as we perceive it, is really the thing we're talking about.

Dr. Bradley Jersak 15:28

And the person of Jesus! Is he going to be buried in the rubble? Or did we not meet him? And so if you think about your house metaphor, and your wife inside the house. This deck is rotten, so I'm going to blow up the house with my wife in it! And that's exactly what I'm seeing people do.

Marc Schelske 15:47

That's a problem. All right. So talk about some of these other metaphors. And if you're proposing alternative metaphors, I'm assuming that means you're proposing them because they bring something to the table that you feel like is more constructive and more, more leading towards flourishing faith. So take us through some of those and talk about what that looks like.

Dr. Bradley Jersak 16:04

Yeah, sure. And I suppose that in many ways, it was a grand, grand effort to avoid using the don't-throw-the-baby-out-with-the-bathwater. That's so old and boring. There's other ways to see this. And people are so complex, that we need different metaphors and where the shoe fits, wear it and where it doesn't don't. But even in my case, there is a difference between my theological deconstruction, which was quite joyful and liberating and my personal deconstruction, in terms of a meltdown that actually had faith repercussions. Like, in the midst of trauma, do I even trust God is good? So that's still a theological question. But, but it's different than my other journey. So one was a dramatic meltdown, and the other was this kind of cool awakening, right. So I'm, again, I'm already rushing into metaphors. But let me go from renovation, which is restoring and revamping existing structures to a completely different ones.

In the world of addictions, we have detox, which may be one or two weeks long. Then we have rehabilitation, which could be months to years long. And then we have recovery, and that is the restoration of health, as we break free of our attachments, harmful habits, addictive behaviors, and then look at the pain beneath them, and bring healing to the things that drove the addictions in the first place. So if I think in terms of faith, then I understand when people need to leave church for a while, for example, or stop reading their Bible for a while, or even not pray for a while, I think of that as detox. I

had to do this with my prayer life, where I had concluded that my prayers had been reduced to me trying to control circumstances and other people's joy, sorrow and choices by telling God what to do. And when he didn't do it, I was angry at him for disobeying me. Right? It was really bad.

Marc Schelske 18:13

Yeah, that's upside down place for sure.

Dr. Bradley Jersak 18:15

Oh, my goodness. So I saw that, thankfully, with a spiritual director who cared for me, and what we did was I detoxed from prayer, because I was so attached to that form. And then we reintroduced it slowly as the Jesus prayer, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me." And after about six months of that, then I reintroduced the Lord's Prayer, because at least Jesus gave it to us. And it felt very bold and scary, but it's like, "but You told me when you pray, pray this." So I went into that. And so over time, my prayer life was rehabilitated after that period of detox. And now I believe I live in recovery, where my prayer life itself is not toxic to me or to others.

I like that metaphor, because it's personal to one's body. And I think, then you can apply it both to your own soul as you do your body, but also to the body of your faith communities. Isn't it a terrible thing when we feel the need to flee from a faith community, because it's so toxic that it's killing us? And I don't want them to just feel guilty into rushing into another one. I get it, right. Yeah, take a break. But I hope you don't live in the detox unit for the rest of your life. That's not it's healthy either.

Marc Schelske 19:32

So that metaphor right now, what is intriguing to me is that by talking about those sort of phases that come from substance abuse recovery, you're actually identifying that there's a different medicine for different needs at the time, right? That detox is "let's stop the damage." But then the next steps are now talking about learning a new way of living and getting to a place where you have a flourishing life that's not constantly fighting against what was toxic before. Those are different kind of phases of the process. Where the deconstruction metaphor is taking apart, and so you've done that. Now what? To what end? You know, recovery is a metaphor saying, "No, we're going toward a sustainable, flourishing healthy life."

Dr. Bradley Jersak 20:25

Yeah, there are those who think, "Okay, I've left, I've left the faith now, and that's forever. And that's probably the healthiest thing for me." And then they talk about, you know, "when I deconstructed," and I'm like, you have no idea how evangelical you still sound, right? Deconstruction is just a new word you use for conversion, and then they have a testimony of their conversion. And then they treat others as less than for not having their conversion. I see this all the time. And my goodness, you're still an evangelist. You haven't actually changed that much. This is just conversion, a second conversion, and Okay, so be it. Maybe you need that. I think I needed it. But just be a little bit aware then, again, how the power dynamics of our old evangelicalism that we thought was so toxic, that we may bring that in now, with a kind of toxic positivity about our great deconstruction experience. "And isn't it for you?" And there are others who are going, Hang on, my experience was deeply traumatic, and your positivity about this does not recognize my trauma, and, and then they feel silenced and belittled. And like they feel like, "I didn't have a good enough testimony."

Marc Schelske 21:45

Right, right. Right. Exactly. Exactly. Right. Well, the trap, right, I grew up in a very head oriented fundamentalist faith community. And the main thing, the most important thing was to be right. Having the right doctrine, that was what allowed you to enter the church. That was what you were measured on for baptism. People that were backslidden were people who had backslidden from the truth, right? It wasn't even backslidden from Jesus, it was backslidden from the truth, you know. So knowing the right thing was the gold standard. Well, folks from that kind of community who deconstruct oftentimes, I think, end up in a place where it's still about knowing the right thing. The thing that matters, that establishes your identity as being okay, is that you're right. It's just that you've changed the standard and matrix of knowledge.

Dr. Bradley Jersak 22:33

Sure. So let's be honest, many who talked deconstruction have simply gone from conservative to progressive, but they're still fundamentalist, right? Like they change sides, but not spirits. And yeah, I'm not saying everyone does that. I'm just saying, slow down and check. Is fundamentalism, still part of your structure? Because if it is, then you didn't go far enough. Using the addict metaphor, we have what's called dry drunks. A dry drunk is someone who is abstaining now from alcohol, but they're still active in terms of the addiction itself. So I can stop going to church. That doesn't mean I've dealt with the character defects of like, let's say, being judgmental, and condemning and condescending. I see that all the time from ex-church people. Their very condemning of evangelicals. And and I'm judgmental of people who do, you know, I'm being it right now! So it's very infectious. And you're like, "Oh, I see. We've not gone far enough."

Marc Schelske 23:35

Yeah, I get that. I had a conversation. My oldest child is a teenager, and a friend of hers invited her to go into larger youth group. And so we were having a conversation about that. And I found myself saying some things about the evangelical youth pastor of this church and the kinds of things she might expect in terms of how this person would relate to her. And that evening, I realized, Oh, you know, I've literally been that guy. The things that he did, I have done those very things. I probably need to have that conversation with my daughter.

Dr. Bradley Jersak 24:07

Yeah, projecting your own judgment of yourself of your past self onto this guy, even as a prejudgment. Here's what he'll probably do, right? Yeah, exactly. I did it and I'm ashamed. When we deal with the shame of who we were, then we're less likely to be judgmental.

Marc Schelske 24:25

So if I recall, one of the metaphors that was in this write up was talking about art restoration.

Dr. Bradley Jersak 24:33

Yeah. That's a really good one. So art restoration. I got that metaphor from Brian Zahnd. So what I mean by this is when you take a masterpiece, over the centuries, where you accumulate grime or people have tried to do touch ups, or they've tried to preserve it with varnish, you can see how very valuable masterpieces can become almost unrecognizable. So what do you do? Well, art restoration experts carefully strip away those layers of varnish and centuries of touch ups. And, and as they carefully do that with the right tools, you unveil or reveal the original masterpiece.

So I'm assuming that the historic Christian faith, that faith Jesus gave us is actually a masterpiece. The funny illustration of this does actually involve two art images of Jesus. So in the first illustration, you have this one image of Jesus called, Ecce Homo, which means, "Behold the man." It's what Pilate said. And it was an icon in this Spanish monastery. But the painted cracked, there was chips out of it, and so on. And an amateur art restorationist came along, and she gave it a go, and she's so botched it it became famous. It was unrecognizable as Jesus. And in fact, the nickname of the painting is now Ecce Mano, which is something like, "Behold the Ape." This is what happens when you have a deconstructionist come along who doesn't know what they're doing, and they start messing with this historic Christian faith. What was damaged to begin with is now completely unrecognizable.

Now contrast that to another masterpiece. Someone found a picture of Jesus, a painting of Jesus, and it was called Salvador Mundi, Savior of the world. This thing had passed hand to hand to hand and someone picked it up for 40 UK pounds, so let's say 80 bucks. Over time, people became suspicious that underneath this painting might be something of value. So they sent it to an expert art restorationist who spent three years very carefully unveiling. At one point, something about the corner of Jesus mouth became completely recognizable as a DaVinci. And by the time they were done, they're like, "this is!" And it went up for auction and I think it's sold for something like \$400 million, this thing of incredible historic value, a true masterpiece. What do you do with that? You don't bring scissors to your deconstruction, you bring a care to it.

Now here my illustration. What if the Christian faith is not something to be trashed, or cut up or thrown out? What if the gospel of Jesus Christ is something precious and beautiful? So in that sense, I'm talking about the restoration of the content of our faith as this living person who is the Savior of the world. And with great care, we might peel back all the crap that we've added to it through the centuries through theological misdeeds and pastoral abuse and so on. But I also want to say, the gospel is not only a masterpiece, what if your heart is? How have we vandalized human hearts in this rush to tear up decades of growth in somebody? And so yes, my good news testimony about that is I grew up in a home that was Baptist, it was conservative, it preached hell, it preached Armageddon, it preached all this stuff. And as I've carefully peeled that back, what I've discovered is, it's in that context that I first heard the name of Jesus and fell in love with him. It's in that context that I fell in love with the scriptures. And now I read them in a way that's life giving. It was in that context that I learned to share good news. And now I'm sharing it to Christians, so they'll become Christian. It was in that context that I felt a real living connection with the person of Christ in my prayer life, and all of that has been preserved.

I've deconstructed the BS. And now I have a deep appreciation for my Baptist heritage. Because it's not just my Baptist heritage, it's the faith of my father that was passed down to me. And then I start exploring that and I realized, oh my goodness, for all the weirdness of how our faith was distorted the amount there was a masterpiece under their worth my great uncle Wilhelm being tortured for in Czechoslovakia, my wife's grandfather being exiled and murdered in Siberia. It's like, What? Why would you give your life for this? Well, because it's priceless. It's the pearl of great price. So what am I saying? Slow down. With care invest in this because it's either the great faith of Jesus Himself, or it's your own precious heart that deserves to be treated kindly.

Marc Schelske 30:13

That makes me think that in a lot of the conversations about deconstruction, a lot of things are sort of being conflated. A lot of things are being put into a one package, when really, you're identifying that there's several things happening that we can evaluate. There's my experience in a Christian community

and how that worked and didn't work. There's my experience of how to read the Bible, and how I was taught to read the Bible that was helpful and how I was taught to read the Bible that wasn't helpful. There's my picture of the character of God, and parts of that imagery that were destructive or hurtful or traumatizing, and parts of that imagery that that were life giving. We can kind of just go down the list. And that that's the thing that we've got to do, to carefully look at the layers like this art restorationist is doing with the varnish and all the layers, the attempts to patch it up to cover over the things we didn't want to talk about. That requires a lot more nuance than maybe the word deconstruction leave space for.

Dr. Bradley Jersak 31:11

Again, I believe in deconstruction, I do it in the real sense and in the popular sense, but, I want to say that there's been this headlong glee about it. I want to be empathetic with people who've had a two-fold trauma. So the first trauma could be the terrible things they learned about God growing up, right, or that first trauma could be abuse by a spiritual leader, or whatever the thing they're leaving is, had a traumatic impact on them. But there's also the trauma of the deconstruction itself. Let's say someone needs to leave a toxic church, but they're also leaving the only community they've ever known. So the leaving itself and the loneliness and isolation and the criticism they get from those people, the sense of betrayal, and then internally, even the loss of meaning, and like panic attacks on Sunday morning, because you don't know what to do with yourself. So there's that secondary trauma, or even how the deconstructionists are impacting us, and so on.

The illustration I would use for that, that's going to be in my forthcoming book, is somebody who has to go through a mastectomy for breast cancer. So the cancer was there, right? And you have to go under the knife to save your life. Sometimes, you have to go through chemo or whatever treatments they're using for that. And the treatment itself becomes another trauma. And so you wake up from surgery, and your breasts are gone. And you didn't get to choose how much you lost. So it is with those who experience the deconstruction itself as trauma. They're like, "I thought I knew there was cancer that had to go, but I didn't realize how much of me I was going to lose. And I'm absolutely traumatized." So then they go on Instagram, and they see all the positivity around deconstruction. And it feels like this, that the deconstruction is like a cheerleader who's spotting for them doing a bench press. "You can do it, you can do it, you're great, you're great, this is exactly what you need". And they're like, "I'm not doing a bench press! I'm under a bulldozer! "I really, really care about those people. That's where I'm coming from on this. It's like, you treat that person, they need to be treated so tenderly, so carefully. And to say, it was necessary but there are perils to this. And yet, maybe there's possibilities too. But I don't want to say that like Job's counselors. I want to say it as a friend who's walking along with them and like, "Okay, this is this is disorienting. Yes, I'll walk with you."

Marc Schelske 34:00

I feel like that is a missing piece of a lot of this conversation, that there's a there's a pastoral element of this. And even for folks that are maybe stepping out of the church and the word "pastor" was part of the problem, there's a coach-of-the-soul element of this, that's necessary. Because like we said at the beginning, religion however you come to it, is ultimately a meaning-making machinery. And you have to have one of those.

Dr. Bradley Jersak 34:29

Yeah, if not that, you are vulnerable to any ideology that comes along, to recruit you.

Marc Schelske 34:36

All of your books in this series, have a subtitle about... I guess Christlike Word doesn't, but it's still infused, the idea of a more beautiful version. So A More Christlike God is a more beautiful gospel. A More Christlike Way is a more beautiful faith. And I would say, even though your subtitle on A More Christlike Word is "Reading scripture the Emmaus Way" that the challenge throughout is how do we read scripture in a more beautiful experience?

Dr. Bradley Jersak 35:04

Yes. It's a more beautiful hermeneutic.

Marc Schelske 35:07

Yeah, exactly.

Dr. Bradley Jersak 35:08

It's points to Jesus.

Marc Schelske 35:08

Yeah. And that and that's rooted in this idea that everything for us, if we're followers of Jesus, the meaning-making machinery is the other-centered, co-suffering, radically forgiving self-giving life of Jesus. That is the lens! And so when you think about deconstruction, how do you bring this lens of a more beautiful way to deconstruction? What would a more Christlike or a more beautiful deconstruction look like?

Dr. Bradley Jersak 35:39

Yeah, so if we think in terms of restoration, what are we restoring here? We're restoring the beautiful image of Christ and His Bride somehow. And so one of the metaphors I use comes from the experience of my daughter-in-law who, when she was shopping for wedding dresses. She's really into vintage--and she had found this website where they had vintage wedding dresses, and she spotted one that was exactly her size. It was a champagne, lace wedding dress sewn in the 1920s. Wow, it was gorgeous and she was able to get it for like a hundred and sixty bucks or something crazy like that. And then she put it on. And she's like, "I couldn't even gain one and a half pounds or lose one and a half pounds. It was so exactly made for me." But it had wrinkles and water stains.

So the scriptures use this metaphor about Christ, presenting his bride without spot or wrinkle. He's talking about the wedding dress. And so we took it down to this, this incredible, stereotypical Chinese dry cleaner. And we're like, "please don't destroy this," right. And so we left it with him. And we, when we came back, it was hanging in his window and it was just radiant. And everybody who would come into the shop was commenting on it. The spots were gone, the wrinkles were gone. His focus was actually not on removing spots and wrinkles. That wasn't his primary goal. His primary goal was preserving the fabric. And so that made him more careful about how he used an iron, more careful about what chemicals he used on the spots. His obsession with retaining the beauty enabled him to get rid of the spots and wrinkles without destroying anything. It was unbelievable. And then she wore it to her wedding and we're just like, "you look so beautiful." And she said, "I feel like a princess, you know, a daughter of the king."

I would call that a more beautiful deconstruction, right? It's this idea of preserving the precious and unveiling the beauty. I do regard beauty as a criteria for truth. Now, in the ancient world, let's say Plato, he's like, God is good. God, if there is a God, that God is the good capital G. And that good subsists of

beauty, truth and justice. And so the truth people, the head people, they're like, we need a faith that's really true, you know, and so they'll do a literalistic, mechanical reading of Scripture to make sure they've got the truth. That's the conservatives. Then the progressives are like, okay, we need the Justice side. And, and maybe they deify justice even so it doesn't actually matter if we love all the time, as long as we've justice, right? But we have this third thing that sort of adjudicates the truth and the justice and that is beauty. And if it's not--I got this from Zahnd too--if it's not beautiful, it's probably not true. And so whatever gospel, whatever hermeneutic, whatever way that we come to our faith, if it's truly Christ then we're going to see beauty as such, with a capital B. That's what I'm doing here. That's why I think we have a more beautiful image of God, and a more beautiful faith in the church in the way of being, and now beautiful way of approaching the scriptures, that is almost certainly more true. That's that's the outcome I'm looking for in my deconstruction. Not just that I'm doing it beautifully, but that I'm, but I'm drawing out the beauty of the thing that's there and behind the grime and behind the years.

REFLECTION

Marc Schelske 39:33

Did you catch this important idea? deconstruction isn't just one thing. That right there is worth the price of admission. When we think about deconstruction, whether our own or someone we know or in the general culture, we've got to keep in mind that there may be several different things going on under that umbrella. This tangled experience might include someone having to detox from a community or a leader or a belief that has been dangerous to them. It might include facing that we were lied to by people we trusted. It might include recovering from religious addiction and perfectionism. It might include healing from trauma. It will certainly include letting go of ideas and communities that used to be a central part of our identity. And always, there's the releasing of closely held beliefs in the process of adapting and adopting new ones. That is a complicated life experience to go through and it's often painful.

It serves us to keep these different elements in mind so that we can use the right tools and even the right metaphors as we untangle all of this. Because even the words we use shaped the way we act and think about ourselves and others. So when is it right and helpful to deconstruct, to really knock down some walls? When should we be renovating instead, carefully disassembling parts of our faith so that we can evaluate what is good and noble, trustworthy and true? And when do we need to detox in order to just stop the damage? And then at what point can we move on to rehabilitation? When are we ready to do the slow, gentle work of art restoration?

Learning, growing, maturing--whether spiritually or just as a human being--these all require seasons of stripping away, redefining, deconstructing what you once thought was certainly. The process is necessary, but as Dr. Jersak pointed out, it also has perils and possibilities. If we can be gentle, compassionate with ourselves and other people, if we can remember the person--the heart--in the middle of the deconstruction, the process can be healing, whether for ourselves or others. The way of Jesus is the other-centered co-suffering path of radical reconciliation. That means that even when the path you are walking is deconstruction, you're not alone. Jesus is walking it with you. And there are others, others who've chosen to take the other-centered co-suffering path, who will walk along as well.

May you have the wisdom to know when to deconstruct, when to renovate, when to detox, and when to join the Spirit in the gentle work of art restoration, so that a beautiful faith can emerge.

Thanks for listening. Notes for today's episode, which includes any links mentioned and a full transcript, something new that I'm doing, can be found at www.MarcAlanSchelske.com/TAW046.

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Until next time, remember: In this one present moment, you are loved, you are known, and you are not alone.