

How to Handle a Faith That is Set Adrift with Sean McDowell

(September 8, 2023)

FRANK:

Ladies and gentlemen, when people ask me, Frank, how did you become a Christian? I normally say that I always believed in God growing up. I knew there had to be some kind of first cause. But I didn't really know who Jesus was. I was brought up in a Catholic home, I went to Catholic high school, but I never really got (and perhaps it was just my fault), I just never really got the whole Jesus thing. Who was Jesus? What did He do for us? And it wasn't until I went into the Navy, back in 1984, I met the son of a Methodist minister and I had so many questions for him.

He finally said to me, look. You just need to get Josh McDowell books, "Evidence That Demands a Verdict" and "More Than a Carpenter." So, I read those books. And then I realized who Jesus was, and I became a Christian. And those books have helped 1000's, probably millions of people at this point, "Evidence That Demands a Verdict" and "More Than a Carpenter." They're still out there. In fact, "Evidence That Demands a Verdict" was updated by a team I was on at Southern Evangelical Seminary about, let's see. That was probably 1999. It's been updated since then.

And one of the people that updated it is Josh's own son, Sean, who now has his own PhD. He's updated, I have "Evidence That Demands a Verdict", also more than a carpenter. But some people don't know that Sean actually had a period where he doubted his faith. And what we're going to talk about today is if you are doubting your faith, what's the proper way to do so, so you can come out on the other side still a Christian? And so, my guest today is the great Dr. Sean McDowell, all the way from the from the (used to be) great state of California. Sean, how are you?

SEAN:

Good to be with you man. That was an awesome intro.

FRANK:

Well, I always tell people that same story, because it's true. When I read "Evidence", I was like, wow. There's just so much evidence here. How do people deny this? But you are the son of the great Josh McDowell. What happened? You doubted too. What happened and why?

SEAN:

I did. Yeah. So, this is mid 90's and I'm a freshman in college. And this is when people are getting these new revolutionary things called email addresses and surfing the internet, pre-Google. And I'm just searching around and somehow, I came across this secular, atheist web that had begun dissecting that book "Evidence That Demands a Verdict", chapter by chapter.



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These were doctors, lawyers, historians, scholars. And that was the first time I had encountered really smart people who made me think twice about my beliefs.

I don't know that I would have worded it this way. But honestly, if someone had asked me, why isn't someone a Christian? Before that time, I would have said, well, they just haven't read one of my dad's books. Like, how hard is it? You know? Like, that's how shallow it probably was. And then around that time, I get rocked. And that just kind of sent me on an intellectual, emotional, a spiritual journey to figure out, what do I believe? Why do I believe it? I don't think I ever rejected my faith, Frank. I wanted to stay a Christian. So, my first question was, is this really true? And so, fortunately, I had people at, you know, Biola, like J.P. Moreland and William Lane Craig and others who could say a lot of the same things my dad said, but sometimes you need to hear it from somebody else.

And they walked me through that piece of my journey. Now, there's a lot more to my story than that. But one of the cool times is when I told my dad, I wish I had an exact calendar and kept record of when this happened. But we were at coffee in Breckenridge, Colorado. And I said something to the effect of, I said, dad, I want to follow Jesus. I just don't know if I'm convinced that it's actually true. Not knowing what this great apologist would say. And I swear, Frank, he didn't miss a beat. He looked at me. He goes, son, I think that's great. And I'm here thinking, he just didn't hear a word that I just said. There's no chance.

And he goes, son, you can't live your life on my convictions. He said, you've got to follow the truth. And I'm convinced if you really follow truth, you will keep following Jesus. And then he said something else. He said, don't reject what you've learned growing up just out of spite to reject it, to rebel. Only reject it, if you're convinced that it's false. And then he said, you know your mom and I will love you no matter what. And that was kind of the process for me. And what's interesting about that Frank is I always heard these stories of people in church.

And I thought for God to use me, I had to have this dramatic conversion story. And then years later, when I would share this story, I'm like, wow. God did use me in a way. I certainly didn't expect to encourage parents whose kids are deconstructing and questioning their faith, to encourage others how to respond well, when somebody's doubting their faith.

FRANK:

Now, if I remember correctly. I thought I heard you say this but correct me if I'm wrong. Your dad, when he said this to you, he also said, whatever you do, son, make sure that you follow the truth wherever it leads. Which I thought was very wise as well.

SEAN:

Yeah, he did. I really wish I had a video camera of this. But he essentially said, make truth supreme. Follow it no matter the cost. That was a big piece, which is my dad's message to anybody all the time anyways. But he emphasized it there.

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FRANK:

You just updated "Evidence That Demands a Verdict." You're also updating "More Than a Carpenter" again, did I hear?

SEAN:

Yeah, that book came out in, I think it was 2009. So, by the time the update comes out, that'll be like, 15 years. A lot has changed. So, we're working on that right now. Yeah. And then "Evidence", probably in another 2, 3, 4 years, there'll be a 10-12 year update.

FRANK:

Now, we're not going to get into details here. But there were some things that were brought up that sort of rocked your world about "Evidence." Has any of that stuck in any way to this point?

SEAN:

Stuck in what way? Make sure I'm tracking with you.

FRANK:

Like, did anyone ever make a really good point that something in "Evidence" was wrong? Or was it just a matter of perspective at the time?

SEAN:

Oh, I would say in the book, there were a few quotes that we had to clean up. There are a few arguments we could make more strongly. Some of the focus of the book shifted, because the questions have shifted over time. I don't recall any blatantly false things. But there were some quotes where I'm like, oh, we didn't quote this correctly and had to tweak when you have a whole team go through stuff. But it was especially that 99 version that had a lot of errors. I'm just kidding. You said you worked on it. [Laughter]

FRANK:

I probably did. I didn't have much to do with it Sean. Now all of a sudden, I'm saying, I had nothing to do with it! [Laughter]

But now, as a result of this, what you went through and as a result of what you're seeing in the culture now, you've got a brand-new book co-written by John Marriott. It's called "Set Adrift: Deconstructing What You Believe Without Sinking Your Faith." It just came out about a week ago. Why did you write this, Sean? And what kind of book is this? It's not a typical apologetics book. But tell our listeners why you wrote it.

SEAN:

I'm glad you asked this, because when I went through that period of questioning, there were two really big people in my life. Well, there's kind of William Lane Craig, J.P. Moreland, and apologists. But then there was a friend of mine by the name of Rob Lone, who was my resident

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director. And he had other questions for me. He kind of acted as a guide for me, just thinking through okay, you're asking these questions. What follows for your life? What does it mean to be a Christian? What experiences have shaped what you believe and why you believed it?

And gave me relational space to work out my faith, and really taught me how to believe, rather than just what to believe. This is the book that I wish somebody had given me when I was going through that period of questioning, you know, what is it, 25+ years ago? Almost 30 years ago. So, it's not an apologetics book. I say right at the beginning, if you're picking up this book, trying to figure out if Christianity is true, go get "Evidence That Demands a Verdict" or listen to Frank Turek. I didn't quote you in there. I'm not going to lie. But that's the next thing I would say.

That's not what this book is. So, if somebody's picking this up saying, I need answers to the tough questions. Get your books, get my books, my dad's books, William Lane Craig, etc. This is more John Marriott, and I am coming alongside people who feel like they're deconstructing their faith, maybe afraid they're going to de-convert, and we're trying to surface deeper issues that might be driving this that they might be aware of, and help them ultimately deconstruct well, in a way that lines up with Scripture and is faithful to Jesus.

FRANK:

So, they're not going to leave the faith. In fact, that's a question I have for Sean right after the break. What does he mean by deconstruction? Because when I hear deconstruction, normally I'm thinking well, people are leaving the faith. I don't think Sean's using it in that regard. We'll talk more with Dr. Sean McDowell right after the break. The new book, "Set Adrift: Deconstructing What You Believe Without Sinking Your Faith." A lot more, don't go anywhere. We're back in just two minutes.

Welcome back to I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist with me, Frank Turek, on the American Family Radio Network. My guest today, Dr. Sean McDowell. We're going to get back to Sean in just a minute. I want to mention a lot coming up. Monday night, we're resuming our archaeology throughout the Bible series. It'll be on YouTube at 7:30 Eastern, Monday the 11th. Then at the 12th, I'll be at Florida Atlantic University. Then on the 14th and 15th, I'll be at the TPUSA Pastors Summit in San Diego, California. Go to TPUSA for more on that. Clovis Hills church in Fresno on the 17th of this month.

And then the next night, Fresno State on the 18th. We're also doing the Unshaken conference the following weekend. I'll be with the great Natasha Crain and equally great Alisa Childers in Tucson, Arizona, at Calvary Chapel Tucson on September 23. I'll be speaking at the services the next day at Calvary Chapel Tucson, the 24th. Then we'll resume our men's Bible study again. That's the archaeology Bible study. We're going through all the archaeology the major archaeological finds all the way from Genesis to Revelation. That'll be on the 25th.

And then the 2023 men's conference or retreat at Camp of the Woods in Speculator in New York. I'll be up there with my friend, Jim Zorn, the former NFL quarterback and coach on the

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29th, 30th, and 1st of October. More coming up in October. So, keep an eye on the calendar there. Hope to see you in any of those places. Pray there's a lot of traveling going on. Pray, I don't like fall asleep. There's just a lot going on. Anyway, I'm talking to my friend the great Dr. Sean McDowell. His new book, "Set Adrift: Deconstructing What You Believe Without Sinking Your Faith."

Sean, let me get clarity on something because I've read the entire book. And one thing that tripped me up slightly in the first chapter was deconstruction. Because when I always think of deconstruction, I think people in the culture mean they're leaving the faith completely. But you don't mean that. What do you mean by it?

SEAN:

Hey, just for the record. You said have people pray that you don't fall asleep. When I pray for you, Frank, given your energy level, that is not something I worry about, just for the record. But let me answer your question.

FRANK:

Come on. I'm getting old. All this travel is wearing me out. But anyway. Tell us what you mean by deconstruction.

SEAN:

That's a really important question, because it's a word that's used in a lot of different ways. And in some ways, it's like progressive Christian. What on earth does that mean? People define it and use it differently. So, one way of deconstruction, which we don't mean, is the postmodern Jacques Derrida means of analyzing a text to dismantle it, which ends up in a relativistic perspective in which there's no authority within the text. That's decidedly what we don't mean.

A second way that it's often used in evangelical circles is not deconstruction, but destruction, which ends up in deconversion and somebody leaving their faith. Now sometimes, there's a certain air that goes with deconstruction. There's an anger, there's an edge that says, I just want to rid myself of anything that's tied to evangelical Christianity. That's kind of a form of what people refer to sometimes as deconstruction. The way we use it is the way, very similar to like Michael Kruger at Reformed Theological Seminary uses it. He says, there's kind of this negative deconstruction. But there's a kind of reforming deconstruction, that is taking one's belief and kind of shedding secondary beliefs that maybe one adopted from the culture, from somebody's experience, that doesn't line up with Scripture, doesn't line up with the person of Jesus. It's a positive experience that somebody has.

So, the "de" refers to breaking down. The construct is to build up. In fact, it's really interesting that Trevin Wax has this fascinating program called Reconstructing Faith. It's this like 12-part podcast series. And he says, there's this negative deconstruction. He says, but then there's this positive kind of reconstruction that's more about building up a positive, lasting faith. So, to answer your question, here's how we define it. We said in its common usage, the term refers to

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the process by which something is disassembled, analyzed, and often reassembled in a new way. That's what we mean by deconstruction.

FRANK:

What would be some of the beliefs that people shed in the process today that aren't primary beliefs in Christianity that they don't necessarily have to believe to be a Christian? What would some of those beliefs be and why do people want to do this to begin with?

SEAN:

I think there's a lot of people who would have beliefs that you and I have talked about, say, for example, young earth creationism, and some cases Old Earth Creationism. But typically, it moves from young earth to old earth. Important issue. Matters how we read the Bible. Matters how we intersect with science, but that's not a primary issue. I would say the role of women in the Church. I mean, that's a very important issue. And it's kind of dividing the Church right now. But it's not an essential issue to the faith. What you see a lot is people are told that these are central views. And if you don't hold this view, you're not a Christian.

And then some people who deconstruct are saying, okay, wait a minute. Maybe this isn't a central view. Maybe there's space within the Christian fold if I shift on that view, rather than completely abandoning Christianity. So those are two common examples that people are talking about today. But there's probably literally dozens and dozens of such beliefs and experiences.

FRANK:

What are some of the common boundaries that people today cross, Sean, that take them out of orthodoxy? These are issues that if they leave aside, or they no longer believe, technically, they're not Christians, according to the historic Christian faith.

SEAN:

Yeah, so we put the Apostle's Creed and the Nicene Creed in the back. And we give these boundaries, we call them kind of like fences, that somebody has to stay within. That's the dogma: Jesus is God, resurrection, salvation by faith, et cetera. These are the cores that the Church has believed for 2000 years. And this is Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant hold on to those beliefs. In the middle of the pasture is where these are kind of doctrines that we can differ on. Now, you don't see as many people leaving today because of say, a different view about the resurrection as maybe that was debated in, you know, the era of the early 1900's. Some of the big issues today, I think that we're really seeing divide the Church are issues like marriage.

And there's a lot of people who are saying this is an agree to disagree issue and putting it in the category of Romans chapter 14. Now, I can't judge anybody's heart, Frank, that is God's job, thankfully. But Scripture is very clear from beginning to the end, that marriage is meant to be one man and one woman, one flesh for one lifetime. That's what marriage is. And same-sex sexual behavior and other kinds of sexual immorality, is always considered outside of the

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marital context, the way we defined it, is always considered sinful. Peter's, sinless, the Gospels of Jesus, sinless, Paul's, et cetera, talk about sexual immorality in that fashion.

So, I think perhaps one of the biggest dividing line issues that I would say is a dogma, is the issue of marriage. And Darrin Belousek, in I think one of the best books defending a biblical historic Christian view of marriage. He says, belief that marriage is a sexed institution, is a catholic doctrine (he means lowercase C), that is about as universal as any belief the Church has held for 2000 years. And yet, there's people coming along saying, we can change the nature of marriage. Now, what I'm doing in this book, is we're not giving a case for marriage. I wrote that book with John Stonestreet. It's called same-sex marriage, you know, a case for defending biblical marriage. I wrote that book.

Here, we're challenging students to say, and my co-author, John Marriott, gives an example where he's talking to a young person who says, I just have a problem with the Christian view. And he says why? He goes, well, it's the Christian view of marriage. And he goes, what is the Christian view? And he lays it out. And this guy goes, it just doesn't ring fair and just to me. Part of what we're doing in this book is saying, okay, where do those sentiments come from? Where do these ideas come from? These come from the culture.

And at some point, we've got to take these sentiments we have, and bow them down to the authority of Jesus, and the Scripture itself. So, can you see how this book is not laying out the apologetic case for marriage? I've done that elsewhere. It's to help young people think through, what's really driving me in this process? What questions should I ask? And like you said, what are the boundaries?

FRANK:

Yeah, and in fact, I know you have your finger on the pulse of the culture quite well, as our friend Alisa Childers does. And when we do see people who have been professed Christian, some of them even ministers of music, people in the church, when they walk away from the faith, I normally see them always citing LGBTQ issues as the reason. Now in this book, you're saying this book isn't for those people, because they're probably going to leave the faith if they can't adhere to what the Bible says about these issues. You're saying that there's another group of people who may have other issues. And they want to just know what's really true, what's really right. And they want to shed anything that's extraneous. They don't want to believe stuff that they don't think is really true, correct?

SEAN:

Yeah, that's exactly right. Now, somebody like the folks that you mentioned, I think if they read this book, they'd feel at least understood. I think they would feel like some clarity on oh, maybe this is where my tension really was with evangelical fold, and I choose this definition of love. So, I think they would find some value in it. But that's not the audience that we're writing for. We say clearly at the beginning of the book, any deconstruction process stops with the person of Jesus.

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And it's two things about Jesus. Number one, the identity of Jesus, that Jesus is God. That is not a negotiable issue for anyone who wants to be a Christian. And second, that Jesus is Lord and Savior. So, that means holding a view of the Scriptures that Jesus held. And that means holding views, whether it's on Hell, whether it's on penal substitutionary atonement, whether it's on marriage, whether it's on genocide, if we find these issues difficult, that's understandable. But when it's all said and done, any deconstruction process has to be about the person Jesus, his identity, and him being Lord and Savior in our life.

And one thing I would say, my co-author had a really good point about this. He said, when you cut a log, you have a certain angle going in. And that angle determines exactly how that log is going to go out. When somebody enters into kind of a questioning, deconstruction phase, really the angle going in, is going to determine how they come out. So, somebody goes into this phase angry at God, disillusioned with the Church, looking for a way out, they're going to leave out the back door. And I've heard you say that yourself, Frank, that apologetics can't stop somebody. But at least they know what they're leaving and why. This book is written for somebody going in saying, I want to follow Jesus. I've resolved the issue in my mind that Christianity is true. But now, how do I live it out and reassemble a lasting significant Biblical faith?

FRANK:

We're talking to Dr. Sean McDowell. His new book, "Set Adrift: Deconstructing What You Believe Without Sinking Your Faith." And we're going to talk a lot more. In fact, there's a great point in the book I want to bring up right after the break. So, don't go anywhere. You're listening to I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist with me, Frank Turek. My guest, Dr. Sean McDowell. Back in two.

Welcome back to I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist. If you're low on the FM dial looking for NPR, go no further. You're never going to hear this on National Public Radio. We're talking to Dr. Sean McDowell about this subject of people leaving the faith or just trying to deconstruct aspects of their faith that aren't really true. And he's written a brand-new book with John Marriott. It's called "Set Adrift: Deconstructing What You Believe Without Sinking Your Faith. And Sean, there's a part of this book that I thought was very profound. You were talking about something known as social imaginaries. Can you unpack that for our audience a little bit?

SEAN:

Yeah. So, think of social imaginaries like the air we breathe, or the water that a fish lives in. We don't think about it. We're not aware of it. But it inhabits kind of everything and shapes everything that we do. Now, it's not another word for worldview. It's not just intellectual. In fact, I'm going to read the way we put it. It says social imaginaries aren't primarily philosophies of life, but rather shared assumptions and background conditions that societies are built on. All social imaginaries contain an unspoken vision of how the world in general, and people in particular ought to be. They reflect how we assume the world is, prior to thinking about it.

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So, these are pre-cognitive assumptions that we have. And then when things happen in culture, whether we realize it or not, we kind of filter them through our social imaginaries. So, one example we give that I was sharing earlier, is John is having a conversation with a young man, a high school student, who asked if they could talk and wanted John's opinion on LGBTQ relationships. Again, John, my co-author. And he basically says this. He says, I believe the Bible is God's Word. And I believe up here (pointing to his head), that it teaches that homosexuality is not God's intention for people, and that same-sex intercourse is sin.

I'm sorry. John gave the biblical defense, and then this young man responded by saying, I understand that the Bible is true, and I want to believe it. But then he said, I just can't shake the feeling that it would be wrong for two people who love each other to be denied the opportunity to express that love towards each other. I believe it's wrong, but I feel that it's right. That was his response.

And so, what we're drawing out and trying to help people realize, especially young people who are deconstructing their faith, is they live in a certain cultural moment. They live in a certain cultural time. It's the air they breathe, and they're not aware of it. So, they're filtering biblical ideas through that social imaginary. And then they result by saying, I know what the Bible says. But I just feel differently. And we see this with marriage, for example.

In a recent book, Jean Twenge, "Generations," she talks about how marriage used to be viewed as this corporate institution that you committed to for the sake of society. But now it's shifted to finding my heart, expressing myself. It's all about the individual. So, when young people, that's the social imaginary that they live in, when they see the biblical injunctions, they think, but I just feel that they ought to be happy. I feel that you ought to do what's right for you.

The problem is, and the point that we draw out here, that I think is really important, is we write, because of his social imaginary (this is the young man who said, I know the Bible says it's wrong, but I feel differently), had he lived 100 years ago, he would have both believed and felt that same-sex unions were wrong. Because 100 years ago, he would have indwelt a different social imaginary. So, our whole goal in this book is to help young people take a step back and say, okay, maybe I feel this way. But why do you feel this way? Where does it come from? And does it line up with Scripture?

That's a great point that I think people often miss. And actually, Tim Keller made a similar point a number of years ago. He was at Wheaton College, and he was giving a talk. And he said, I want you to imagine this. I want you to imagine a Viking 1000 years ago in Norway, who has two conflicting desires. One is same-sex attraction, and the other is, he wants to use power to crush people. And he said to the audience, 1000 years ago, which one of those two desires would he elevate, and which one of those two would he suppress? And he basically said, obviously, he's going to suppress the same-sex attraction and elevate the idea that he wanted to crush people, because that's what the culture or the social imaginary as you pointed, would teach him.

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But take that same guy 1000 years later and put him in San Francisco or Manhattan and he has those same two desires. Which one of those desires is he going to elevate, and which one is he going to suppress? The opposite. He's going to elevate same-sex attraction, because his culture is going to applaud him for that. And he's going to suppress the so-called toxic masculinity, because the culture doesn't want that. And so, his feelings are being informed by the culture, not by the truth. And he may think he's following his heart. But in reality, he's following whatever the culture tells him to do.

SEAN:

That's such a good example. And I think that gets to the heart of it. Again, this is really the story Jean Twenge the sociologist tells in her book "Generations." We've seen this story of religion shift from the silence in like the 1920s, to what she calls the polars, those who are like 10 or 12 and younger today, where religion was something you discovered truth and you follow it. You conform your life to an external reality. Things like duty are important. Now, the locus of meaning has shifted internally to how I feel, what I want. And your job is to affirm, in a sense, what I want, or you have done something wrong.

This is the social imaginary, that this generation many are just assuming, and then go in the Bible. No wonder they find the biblical commands on sexuality and marriage to be offensive and unattractive and outdated. They haven't thought about it. They just had this gut-wrench emotional reaction to it. That's a wonderful example by Keller, and I think it highlights why many young people deconstruct their faith and end up de-converting, because they're not able to disentangle and say wait a minute. Where do these assumptions even come from?

FRANK:

And isn't it interesting, Sean, that to a certain extent, the culture today is taking values of Christianity and applying them in other areas. Equality, love, fairness, these are all Christian values that are now being applied to behaviors that the same Christian God would not want us to apply these behaviors to or apply these values to. So, in a certain sense, people are stealing from God while they're arguing against Him. But that's because they're operating on feelings. They're not operating on logic at this point, which is one reason we need to start teaching logic, ladies and gentlemen.

You know, we have that logic course coming up for sixth to eighth graders. But if you're not a sixth to eighth grader, and you want to take the course, you can still take the self-paced version. Go to CrossExamined.org. It starts next month in October. Check it out there. Sean, I also want to ask you, what do you think motivates people to evaluate their faith, maybe even deconstruct their faith, now more so than in the past?

SEAN:

That's a really good question. I think there's a few things. Number one is just the access to information and the access to different worldviews. So, in the past, a lot of times people were

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just limited, who they would meet, who they would see, what they would read. Now nonstop through TikTok, Netflix, and through the internet, there's a ubiquity of information that by itself can unsettle people and raise the question, is this true and how do I know it is true? I think that's one piece of it.

I think the other piece is we just live in this what's called an age of authenticity, where one of the highest ethics is to be true to yourself. You be you. And we have to express ourselves. So, if I'm going through a period of questioning, this isn't something like for me, it was between a few people in my life. It was very private. I just was like, I don't need to express this to the world and tell everybody I'm questioning things. I've got to figure some things out first. Well now, there's this huge emphasis on, you've got to tell the world. You've got to tell your story. You've got to get views and clicks.

So, from the amount of information to this pressure to just explain, and be yourself, and kind of, you know, just project it to the world. I think we see this reason. There's a third reason, though, is these deconstruction stories that turn into deconversion. They meet the press. People love these stories. So, friend of mine, Bart Campolo, was Tony Campolo's son. And he went through, and I talked about it a little bit in the book. We've been friends for years. He went through a deconstruction process where he was getting rid of the sovereignty of God, the authority of the Bible, biblical view of sexuality. Eventually the Jenga tower fell. He pulled out too many essentials.

But when he became a chaplain in LA, the I think it was the LA Times or big publication did a huge story about him, in part because he's the son of a great evangelist who left his faith. That's an interesting story. It's not as interesting to say the son of Josh McDowell follows in his father's footsteps. That's not going to sell as many stories and get as many clicks and get as many views. So, you don't have to be that level of a father just in terms of telling a sexy, dramatic story, gets views and it gets a response. So, in some ways, we have the perfect storm we live in that is just encouraging kids to rethink their faith, which is not a bad thing. But then to abandon their faith and proclaim to the world that they've now abandoned it. I think that's an unhealthy trend.

FRANK:

Yeah, our friend John Cooper, the lead of Skillet, the rock band Skillet. I remember one of those famous musicians came out and said he's no longer a believer. And John came out on a big, long Facebook rant and finally said, look. Have a little humility, will you? Ten minutes ago, you thought Christianity was true. Now you don't think it's true and you've got to tell the world. Maybe you ought to pause a little bit. Right? And evaluate what you believe now, and why you think it's true, before you go out there and try and tell everybody look, I was wrong before. Now I'm right. Why do you think you're right now?

By the way, what's so often not observed, when it comes to people deconstructing their faith is they're automatically reconstructing another faith, whether they know it or not. There are now

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certain aspects of reality they think are no longer true. Well, maybe God doesn't exist. Oh, he doesn't exist? Well then, how did this universe get here? Why is it fine-tuned? Why are there objective moral values? All these questions still need to be answered, and people don't seem to realize they now have an obligation to answer if they're going to be intellectual anyway, to answer and give reasons why the world is the way it is, if God doesn't exist. Sean, let me ask you. What are some of the dangers that are going to occur if people go down this road of evaluating their faith and maybe deconstructing?

SEAN:

Yeah, we listed a few in the book, but one is obviously deconversion. If you start questioning your faith, there's a chance you might abandon it. That can happen. I mean, there's nothing new in that regard. I've been reading 1 Timothy in my time in the morning studying the Scriptures. And Paul like names Hymenaeus and Alexander. He literally named those who de-converted and started teaching false doctrine. So, there is a risk, and we see this happen sometimes. Now for me, that was a risk worth taking, because I had to have a faith that was my own. I had to know what I believed and why I believed it. I had to think through some of these doctrines and have good reasons for it. And the other one, of course, is heresy that people can fade into, is adopt a heretical view of the Trinity, marriage, identity of Jesus, etc. Those are too dangerous to avoid.

FRANK:

Yeah, if you want a guidebook to help you do this safely, you need to get "Set Adrift: Deconstructing What You Believe Without Sinking Your Faith" by my guest, Dr. Sean McDowell and also John Marriott. It just came out about a week ago. Wherever you get books, you can get it. Again, the book is called "Set Adrift." And we're back with Dr. Sean McDowell in just two minutes.

Ladies and gentlemen, when someone comes to you, maybe a young person or even an older person comes to you and says, I think I might be deconstructing my faith, not de-converting, but I don't know if I believe everything I once thought I believed. What do you say? What kind of advice do you give? And my friend Dr. Sean McDowell does so in the book "Set Adrift." Brand-new book. His co-author is John Marriott. Give us some practical ideas and practical advice, Sean. Someone comes to you and says, look. I don't know if I believe this stuff anymore. What do you do?

SEAN:

Proverbs 20:5 says, the purposes in a man's heart are deep, and a man or a person of wisdom, draws it out. So, when someone comes to me, I've had dozens and dozens of these conversations at Biola, where I teach at traveling around and speaking online with folks. I want to get to the heart of it. Why is somebody deconstructing? If you ask somebody, what they'll almost inevitably say, is some intellectual reason. Well, there's contradictions in the Bible, genocide in the Old Testament, Hell, slavery, LGBTQ, you name it. But I've almost always found

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that there's deeper issues at play. And I know this is something you've talked about. So, I'll give a couple examples of this.

I had a young man come to me one time and he said, so is same-sex marriage like the worst sin? And I thought, well, that's an interesting question. I said, let's go talk outside. I listened to him, and I tried to respond intellectually. Eventually, I said, you know, my suspicion is that more is going on here. Tell me about that. Why do you ask this question? And he had same-sex marriage, and it was making him question his faith. And he wasn't sure, how do I fit in within this Christian fold? He wanted to be a Christian, but the root of his question was not primarily theological. It was relational.

Will I be loved? Will you think different of me? Do I belong? That's a root heart issue, that you can really only help this young man own and process his faith when you understand it. I had another young man. I was at an event. And he said something to the effect of, he said, hey, you know, I did my atheist roleplay. And afterwards he goes, hey, let's have a conversation. He goes, I'm an atheist. I said, okay. Went outside and he had all these apologetics questions from him, all the ones you and I get all the time, Frank. And after about 10 or 15 minutes, I said to him, I said, you know, I could be off base. And if so, I apologize. But I have a hard time believing a 19 year old young man is really wrestling with these questions you're asking me. Tell me what's going on. And he goes, you know, I grew up in a Christian home, and I'm going away to college. I just want to have fun for season.

I said, okay. Now we're talking about what's going on. In his case, it was moral. I'm not saying people don't have real intellectual issues. But I want to listen to that person. I want to show this person I'm not threatened by their questions. I want to show him I still care about him, and I'm here for him wherever this process goes. But I want to get to the heart of it and try to deal with it as I can. So again, for me, I had real intellectual questions. But I also had some heart issues about my faith, about my future, about my identity, that went along with this. And it was my friend Rob Lone who gave me space to rest with these.

And so, a lot of times when somebody's questioning their faith, don't freak out. Don't jump to an answer and say, well buy this book. Just say, okay, tell me about it. Share your story. When did this start? Who else have you told? Where do you think this is going? If you had to guess in two to five years, where do you think this is headed? And even questions like you came to me. Why did you come to me? How do you see me best helping you? And then this person knows I love them. I care about them. And then sometimes it shifts towards intellectual issues, and I'll try to give an answer to it. But honestly, Frank, I've spent a lot of time in my life answering questions that people aren't even really asking. And the older I get, the more I want to go, what is the heart of the question you're asking?

One thing you'll see through the book is we talk a lot about the pain of deconstructing. And that's because when people start the process, for myself, I wanted to stay within the Christian faith. I thought it was true, but I didn't really know where it was leading. I just had to be honest

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with myself, and I had to go back to Scripture. Jude 1:22 says have mercy on those who doubt. Have mercy. So, we apologists like to cite the example of when you know, John the Baptist, sends His disciples to Jesus.

And he says, you know, are you the one? He goes, the lame walk, the blind see, and the deaf hear, and you know, the dead raise again, and the good news is preached. Like apologetics, give people who have doubt apologetics. And we need to. But we also need to show grace, and mercy, and kindness. Because it can be a painful process, and it was painful for me. And so, give people that space to work through, and think through, and be that guide for them when they're deconstructing.

FRANK:

Especially if you're a parent, your dad did it the right way with you. And if you're just tuning in friends, you've got to go to the I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist podcast and listen to the intro of this program because Sean revealed what his dad said to him when Sean came to him and said, I don't know if I believe what you believe, dad. And it was very good advice. So, parents, if you're listening to this, and you want to be prepared if your child comes to you, listen to the first half of this show. By the way, Sean, I also think it's kind of a backhanded compliment to apologetics and to reason, when people actually give intellectual reasons for not being a Christian, even though that's not really the reason, when they have moral issues.

In other words, they want to be seen as intellectual. They want to make it seem like oh, yeah, it's all reason with me, right? I don't want to admit I just want to go out and have fun and do what I want to do. So, I'm going to give you intellectual reasons why I'm not a Christian. But in reality, the reason I don't want to be a Christian is because I just don't want to. I want to live my own life. Let me ask you this. What do you say to those who want to hold on to the Christian faith built on Jesus, but they separate themselves from some of the more difficult passages of the Bible? What do you say to such people?

SEAN:

When you say separate themselves, you mean like, I want to follow Jesus, but I don't think that genocide happened, or Hell, or substitutionary atonement.

FRANK:

Or even if it is genocide. Yeah, yeah. Those issues. Yeah.

SEAN:

Now, on one level, if somebody says, I'm a follower of Jesus, and they follow the essentials, and believe in Him, and take a view on that, that says, well, maybe it wasn't historical. I'm not going to say that person has lost their faith and can't be a follower of Jesus. I think there's space for that. But I'm just going to push back a little bit and say, okay, why? What view did Jesus hold? And for me, and again, the older I get...I'm 47. Some of these tough questions, I just go back and I'm like, what did Jesus believe about this? Because it says in 1 Corinthians, we see

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through a glass darkly. I'm more and more aware of my limitations. I'm more and more aware of my biases. I'm more and more aware of my shortcomings.

And if Jesus believed in Hell, that's good enough for me. If Jesus taught and believed in substitutionary atonement, that's good enough for me. If Jesus affirms Noah's Ark, and the flood, well, maybe I don't understand it, and my moral intuitions take issue with it, that's good enough for me. So, I think we have to go back to the person of Jesus, but ask what did Jesus view about the Scriptures? And I live in a little bit of tension with that. I mean, there are things in the Old Testament where I'm like, man. Couldn't God have done it a different way? Hell sure is terrible.

Like, I'm going to affirm with people in the sense of saying, I understand why you feel that way. Like, I get it. We don't have to pretend that our apologetic answers are just easy, and clean, and don't leave people with questions. At least I don't feel the need to do so. But when it's all said and done, I've got to line up my feelings with Scripture. And I think we see Jesus doing this in the Church throughout history as a whole doing this.

FRANK:

Yeah. And the problem, of course, for the skeptic is they're assuming a standard when they say aspects of the Old Testament are immoral. Well, what standard is that if there is no God? And if you're claiming there's another God out there that is the true God, and the true God doesn't agree with what the Old Testament says...okay, give us evidence that this other God exists. The problem is, if you try and do that, you quickly run into the evidence that Jesus really is the true God.

When you look at the evidence of his death, burial, and resurrection, and you realize He did rise from the dead, and He's affirming what goes on in The Old Testament, because in the Old Testament, we have judgment. And we don't believe in judgment much anymore, Sean, unless you agree with people on the other side of the aisle. Then they'll judge you for that. Right? So, everybody's making judgments. The only question is, what's the right judgment? Sorry, go ahead.

SEAN:

Oh, no. I was going to say, I think you're right. That's one of the things we're trying to pull out in the book is we'll say, okay. Why do we look at the Old Testament and take issue with some passages, and not other passages? Where are these sentiments and intuitions coming from? And a lot of them are coming from our social imaginary. So really, in this book, instead of answering Hell, and genocide, and these great questions you and I have tackled for decades now, what we're trying to help young people do, young Christians....and not just young Christians, anybody.

We see people in their 30's and 40's, who are kind of deconstructing and rethinking their faith. We're taking a step back and saying, why are we taking issue with those issues? Where does

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that feeling come from? Why is that an objection? Could there be something deeper going on, we need to pay attention to? And that kind of point often gets lost in these conversations. And we as apologist launch into responses, but sometimes don't get to the heart of the issue with people.

FRANK:

The book again, friends, is called "Set Adrift: Deconstructing What You Believe Without Sinking Your Faith." It's written by my friend, Dr. Sean McDowell and co-author John Marriott. So, wherever you get books, you can get it. Sean, you do some great interviews. I want people to know about your YouTube channel, because you probably more than any other apologist have a lot of unbelievers on, people from the other side of the aisle, on many issues. Where can they find your YouTube channel? What are you working on right now?

SEAN:

Yeah, I take a little bit of a different approach on YouTube. I've had some debates. I have a lot of guests on like yourself recently that when you came on, has 100,000+ views, and you talk about transgender ideology. But I just recently had on for example, like Jon Steingard, who was the musician, who's the head of Hawk Nelson. He left his faith. It wasn't a debate. We had an extensive conversation, right? I just listened, and I asked him questions. And I just pushed back on one or two things about the soul.

But really, I'm trying to mentor people and model how to just have civil, thoughtful, meaningful, spiritual conversations with people who see the world differently. I had one recently that is absolutely blowing up, hundreds of thousands of views, with a former abortion doctor who was performing abortions. His name is Dr. Tony Levatino. And what changed his mind, was the death of his own daughter. And it blew him away. So anyways, that's on YouTube. People can check it out.

Check it out friends. Sean McDowell on YouTube, also SeanMcdowell.org. Check it out. Also, check out the book "Set Adrift." Great being with you friends. Lord willing, I'll see you here next week. God bless.

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