

I don't have enough **FAITH**
to be an **ATHEIST**

with Dr. Frank Turek **PODCAST**

Help! My Loved One Says I'm Toxic! | with Alisa Childers and Tim Barnett

(January 30, 2024)

FRANK:

Do you know people who have left the Orthodox Christian faith and now they may call you toxic, or homophobic, or unsafe? They don't want to even reason. They might not even want you in their lives. What do you do? Well, we're continuing our conversation with Alisa Childers and Tim Barnett, who wrote the great new book, 'The Deconstruction of Christianity.' If you didn't hear the first podcast on this, you probably want to go back and start there, because we're going to jump right in to where we left off. We talked a lot about deconstruction, what it is, what causes it, why do people leave the Christian faith.

And now we're really getting into the advice on what you can do when somebody says you're toxic and I don't want you in my life anymore. There's an entire chapter in the book, 'The Deconstruction of Christianity' called advice. And we're going to dive into it right now. But before I do, Tim, let me start with you. It seems like this deconstruction movement is almost a species of critical theory. And the reason I say that is because they put people into categories, oppressed/oppressor. They think an evangelical Christian defined properly is an oppressor. And they think that reason is a tool of oppression. So, if you're trying to reason with somebody who rejects reason, what do you do? What approach do you take?

TIM:

Yeah, this is a problem that people are going to run up against. And again, if they listen to the conversation we've had up to this point, they understand that deconstruction isn't about what's true. It's about something else. If you get rid of truth, then what you're left with is power and power plays. This is where the kind of critical theory comes in, because there's going to be oppressors, and there's going to be the oppressed. Okay? There's going to be the victimizers, and there's going to be the victims. And so, when someone looks at a doctrine through that lens, let's just take the doctrine of Hell, for example. This comes up all the time on social media, people railing against how someone could believe in Hell. In fact, if you teach Hell to your kids, that is child abuse.

Well, where does that come from? It's because they bypass the discussion about truth, and they've just assumed it's not in that category. So, if you tell your kids that they could spend eternity in Hell, well, that's abusive. But as we point out in the book, if you come across someone who's laying on the ground, and someone's on top of them kind of beating their chest, how do you know if that's abuse or not? How do you know if this person is being oppressed or is a victim? Well, you need to know the truth of the situation. If this person has just suffered a heart attack, and the person overtop of them is beating their chest because they're doing chest compressions, well, that gives you a completely different perspective of what's going on. Now is what the person doing toxic? Is it oppressive? Are they a victimizer? No, of course not.

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They're trying to save this person's life. But this ends up being part of the issue. So, when someone comes to you and they have this kind of critical theory, kind of the deconstructionist worldview where there is no truth, while it may be helpful to point out that this is where they're coming from, they may not even understand what's going on. Point out that they've denied truth. Let's look at what's true first. And then we can determine whether or not this is harmful, or toxic, or whatever word you want to use. But the truth question has to be the first question. If you don't answer that, well, then you can't answer the other.

FRANK:

Yeah, it seems to me, it used to be, is Christianity true? Now the question is, is Christianity good? And, of course, people don't have a standard for either of those if they're deconstructing everything, right? If there's no God, well, then there's no ground for truth. There's no ground for morality either. Yet, they think that orthodox evangelical views are somehow immoral, which I just can't help looking at it that way. I know that's probably, maybe not the first tactic to take Alisa, is it? To start talking about, well, here's why you're logically wrong. What tactic do you take with somebody? I mean, you're younger. But suppose you had an older child? They're adult now and they say, hey, mom. You are never going to see your grandchildren again because you're toxic.

ALISA:

Well, yeah, this is such a tough question. And it's one we really poured our hearts and souls into in our advice chapter. One of the things we do is, we first of all acknowledge that every relationship dynamic is a little bit different. And how you're going to approach it is going to depend on that. Like, for example, if you have a spouse who's deconstructing, you're going to approach that a bit differently than you would if you had an adult child who has cut you off and forbidden you to see the grandkids. Which by the way, we are not exaggerating about that.

Frank, night after night, after night when I go out and speak, I always meet at least one couple who tells me that some have even received a no contact letter. So, this is something that's very, very common. We're not just kind of making this up and exaggerating. But you're going to also, you know, maybe how a parent of a teenager who's deconstructing, you're going to handle that a lot differently than you would if it's your college friend. And so, we tried to walk through some of those scenarios. But let's just take that example you brought up of the elderly couple with the grown children who won't let their parents see their grandkids. One of the things we say is it's kind of like triage.

Depending on the relationship, depending on the fragility of the relationship, you want to do some triage. So, it's kind of like they do in hospitals when there's an accident and people start coming into the ER, and the doctors have to say, okay, which injury is the most serious? What do we need to treat first? So, the guy that has the punctured lung or a gunshot, he's going to get treated before the person with a sprained wrist or something like that. And so, that's the first thing we advise you to do, is do a little triage. Like, how fragile is this relationship? If it's fragile, if you've actually been told you're toxic. You can't see us anymore. Do not contact me.

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Then what we say is that it's really okay to back off. Respect that boundary, and just try if you can, try to stay in their life. And I talked with a woman just a couple of weeks ago, who said, you know, once in a while, I'll just text a little bit of some encouragement, like, I love you to my loved one who's deconstructed and doesn't want to talk to me. Sometimes they don't even respond back. But I just do it every once in a while. I pray. And if I feel like that's something I want to say, I just say, hey, I love you. I just want you to know, I'm thinking about you. It's really okay to do that. That's a little bit counter intuitive for Christians. We want to ask them out for coffee, and fix their theology over the coffee date, and point out all the errors.

But we have to understand, there's a lot of wounds behind the person who's deconstructing. And like Tim mentioned in the other podcast, sometimes, you know, the perceived or real abuse. Sometimes the abuse is just perceived. For example, being told that you can't live a sinful lifestyle and remain a member at a church or being told that you're a sinner in need of a Savior. These things are perceived as being abusive. In fact, I went on a comment section one time when somebody was claiming abuse, that evangelicals are abusive. And I acknowledged that there is real spiritual abuse. I know it. I've walked it. I've been through it. I believe that spiritual abuse is real.

But sometimes people just say being told they're sinners, or that Jesus died on the cross for their sins is abusive. And when I said that, the person came back in the comments and said, to teach substitutionary atonement is abusive. So, it requires some untangling of knots. So, I would say, whatever relationship you have with your loved one, really seek to listen. Try to identify maybe what the wounds are behind the deconstruction. I said this just a couple of days ago when I was at a Q&A about this.

A woman said she had a friend who's been through a lot of abuse in church, and she's very confused. And I said, look. Right now, your main goal is to cry with those who cry. Try to minister to your friend. Maybe she needs some good biblical counseling. And don't worry so much about the other stuff yet, but maybe just get her some help to help heal from the abuse. And then as you go, you can guide her toward biblical truth or something like that.

But each situation is so unique and requires such a specific response. Like, for example, we tell this example in the book. If you're in college, and your college friend is in deconstruction, and it's wrecking your faith, it's okay for you to draw a boundary with them and say, hey, can we press the pause button on these types of discussions? Because I just need to catch my breath and catch up with some of the things you've said about Christianity and look it up for myself. And in that case, it's okay for you to be the one to draw the boundary. So, it depends on the relationship. And again, do a little bit of that triage. But it is okay to back off and recognize that you might just have a fragile window of opportunity to simply stay in their life.

FRANK:

The book again is called, 'The Deconstruction of Christianity.' And the chapter we're talking about right now is the chapter called "Advice." And Tim, Alisa mentioned one of the steps, one

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of the pieces of advice is to set boundaries and respect theirs. And you have a list of questions in here beginning on page 237. Some questions that you can ask yourself and maybe the person that you love, in order to advance the relationship. What are some of those questions? What are some of those insights? You can add anything you want to what Alisa said.

TIM:

Sure, yeah. These are just kind of starter questions that we came up with. So, other questions might come to your mind. But here are some of them that we list in the book. How close is your relationship with the person who's deconstructing? That's a good question to ask yourself. There are times when, if it's kind of a friend relationship, you have closer friends than others. And so, is this the kind of friend that you can go to, and they'll listen to you if you offer them advice? Or is this the kind of person that really opens up to you?

Okay, so that might be the kind of question to ask. Is this a family member that is more casual? Or is this someone that's really close to you? Are you bringing up issues of faith every time you see them? This is a kind of an important point, or an important question to ask. The last thing, if my daughter came to me, my daughters are small right now. But let's say they're older, 20 years old and come to me. Daddy, I'm deconstructing. The last thing I would want to do is bring up faith, and religion, and Christianity every time we get together. There has to be times where I'm just dad, and you're just daughter, you know? Let's go shopping. Let's go for a movie. Let's go grab ice cream, you know? Those kinds of things.

So, I'm continually like, just being dad. I want my kids to know that I love them. Period. Not I love you, but you really need to believe what daddy believes. You know? So, it's really important that they feel loved. And in fact, watching deconstructionists share their deconstruction testimonies, oftentimes, they feel like they're not loved because they no longer believe as their loved ones do. So, the first thing I want my kids to know, or my loved ones to know is, listen. I still love you, even though we don't share the same beliefs. So, we're going to set boundaries. But daddy still wants to talk about this, and I'm here for you anytime. You call me, let's go wherever. You want to go out for dinner, and we'll just talk about the incarnation or the doctrine of Hell, or whatever theological questions you want to talk about, we can set aside time for that.

But the point is, there's a place and a time for it. It's not the kind of thing that I'm bringing up every single time. I've had these relationships in my own life where unbelievers or whatever, every time we get together, they just want to talk about this. And it's like, now I don't even want to get together because I know this is going to be the thing, and we can't enjoy our company. We can't just enjoy our time together because it's going to be some kind of debate. And there's some nights I don't want to debate, you know? I just want to be together. So, these are questions again, to help you think. When's the right time and when's the wrong time?

FRANK:

So, there are some nights you don't want to be married? Is that what you're saying, Tim?
[Laughter]

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TIM:

But it's a really good point. We actually make a connection between deconstruction and divorce. A lot of these stories ends up being like the stories. If your listeners know someone who's going through divorce, oftentimes, the same kind of resentment, and hostility, and anger, and bitterness, that's all in these deconstruction stories as well. It's like the person going through a divorce. But look at my wife and I, when we have conflict, we handle it differently. My wife wants to settle it right now, you know? And I oftentimes just want, let me think about this. I just need like, a breather. So, I'll end up sometimes walking away physically, you know? Like, let me go think about this. And she will sometimes like chase me, you know?

Early on in our marriage, she'd be right behind me. And I'm like, what's happening right now? I just need time to think. And in the same way, we want to set these boundaries. So, my wife knows if there's an argument or something, I just need space to think about it. And once I've thought about it, oh, yeah. My wife's right. I'm wrong. You know? And I come back, and I can apologize or whatever. But if I get my back pushed against a wall, I get defensive. That's kind of like the personality there. And I might say something that I'll regret. So, you know, again, learning who you're talking to, and understanding how receptive they're going to be when we get into these kinds of conversations.

FRANK:

Yeah, I need time to think about it so I can then get my red pen out, honey. That's going to work. [Laughter] Red Pen Logic, ladies and gentlemen. Check it out on YouTube. Alisa, I think sometimes probably parents or friends almost feel guilty when their loved one has now, you know, said I don't want to see you again because your beliefs are toxic and all this. But you have a little story in the book here about a lady by the name of Heather. That's what you named her anyway, because that's her name. Well, why don't you just tell the story. You're not responsible for what she does is the moral of the story. But go ahead.

ALISA:

Yeah, so Heather is not her real name, of course. And I was just going to say to add to Tim's story, Tim, if you would just start with going and saying my wife is right and I was wrong, then you could save yourself the time to think about it and come back later. Just start with that, you know? [Laughter]

TIM:

That's good. [Laughter]

ALISA:

You know, just a little pro tip there. You're welcome, Stacy. [Laughter] Okay, so the story about Heather. So, Heather and I went to church together. We were friends and became quite closer surrounding an experience of spiritual abuse that we'd been through together. Now, Heather ended up leaving the church as we all did, and we stayed in touch.

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I noticed that she was starting to deconstruct. So, she would email me questions about, you know, the New Testament, the reliability of the New Testament. And I would answer her questions, and even send her some resources and books to read, but she would write back with kind of the same question, just reformulated. And this started to happen again, and again. And I couldn't really understand what was happening, because I'm thinking I'm giving her all these great resources. And she's obviously wanting to dig deeper. There's books she can read. And she didn't really want to read those. She just wanted to keep kind of going back to Bart Ehrman and people like that.

And so, I was like, what's going on here? And it occurred to me that she had become persuaded that the Bible was written as a tool of oppression against women. It was written to keep women down. Because of this pastor that we had both known, you know, he kind of had that sort of mentality. And she just thought, well, Christianity must be built upon men just like him. And she really became persuaded that that was the case. So, it didn't matter what I said, to try to answer her question. She had drawn her conclusion already. Well, Heather went further into deconstruction, and as far as I understand, fully left the faith.

But we had a dinner one night. And it was me, and her, and her husband. And we just talked, and they kept bringing up all these skeptical claims against Christianity. But it was also very emotionally charged. So, Heather was crying a lot. She would just kind of gasp into these sobs. And I just didn't think that was the greatest time for me to pull out my, you know, apologetics toolkit and start, you know, telling her what she was wrong about. So, I just listened. And at the end, we go out to the car, and I give them hugs. And she kind of just blurted out, well, if you'd had any answers, we'd have taken them.

And the implication was, you're a professional apologist and you didn't even have the answers to these questions we brought up. See, this whole thing is a sham. And that was essentially the implication of that. And man, I carried that for a long time. I felt so bad, like I had really blown it. Like, Heather has deconstructed because I couldn't answer her questions.

FRANK:

What are you doing tomorrow night, Heather? I'll bring the answers tomorrow night. [Laughter]

ALISA:

Yeah, exactly. I know, I should have done that. But I was just honestly so shell-shocked by the accusation. And so, then I realized, you know what? This is not on me. I am not that powerful. You know, you're not all powerful. I'm not all powerful. And so, Heather's deconstruction is not on me. Even if I would have said the most eloquently perfect answers, if I would have been Frank Turek at that dinner and just known exactly what to say, she still probably would have deconstructed because it was not a truth quest. Like we learned, it's not an intellectual problem. It's an emotional problem.

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And so, this is the hope we hope to give people who read the book. Because I've also had parents come up to me and say, we thought we did everything right? We don't know what else we could have done. But I've had many others say, I totally blew it. When my kid brought up these problems, I lost my cool, and I pushed them away. And now they don't want to talk to me anymore. And I love looking into the eyes of people like that and saying, you know what? It's not on you. You're just not that powerful. You're not the Holy Spirit. You can blow it.

But you know what? What a great opportunity (if the opportunity arises) to model repentance and humility and say, hey, I'm so sorry that I didn't react the way that I wish I would have. It just shocked me, and I just ask your forgiveness. And I really want to try to do better. I really want to understand what's going on with you. And there's so many ways that you can model that. But ultimately, to know that, you know, your loved one's deconstruction is not your fault.

People grow up in homes where they are taught, they're disciplined well, they're taught the Scriptures there, everything's great, and then the kid becomes an atheist. And there's other homes where they blow it on everything, and the kid becomes the next Billy Graham. So, you never know. Just do the best you can with what you have at the time and know that it's ultimately not on your shoulders.

FRANK:

Well, Tim, you write in the book along with Alisa in 'The Deconstruction of Christianity,' there are two kinds of questions. What are the two?

TIM:

There are questions that are seeking answers, and there are questions that are seeking exits.

FRANK:

What do you mean by exits?

TIM:

Yeah, so, one of the stories I think we allude to, or we talk about is how Herod was seeking the newborn King, right? The newborn Jesus. The wise men are there, the Magi, and they're going to go to Bethlehem and find this king. And he's like, yeah. Let me know so I can go seek Him as well. And I thought, here's this word seek, right? If people just open up their Bible, they can see the word seek is used all over the New Testament. And in this case, Herod is seeking Jesus. But He's not seeking Jesus because He wants to worship Jesus. It actually says he's seeking Him because he wants to destroy Him. Well, why does he want to destroy Him? Because Jesus is a challenge to Herod's throne. He's a potential King, right? This is what the Magi say.

So, when we thought it through, we thought, man. There are a lot of people who are seeking. There's no doubt. But they're seeking their own throne. They're seeking exits. Why? Because they want to be the authority in their own life. They want to be God. And I mean, this becomes real clear when you start watching the deconstruction stories and following these guys online. I

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mean, just Michael Gungor the other day. I did a little Red Pen video, and he says the only place that you can find truth (capital T), is within yourself. That's the only place. In my response, I said, well, he put that online. He thinks that's true. And I didn't come to it because I looked inside myself. I would have come to that because I saw it on Instagram, you know? So, it's self-refuting. But notice, it's about authority. In fact, in the caption below the video, he says that there's an illusion that there's an authority outside of us, whether it's God, the Bible, or something else. No, you are the ultimate authority. And that's what this comes down to.

There is a worldview that puts God and His Word as the final authority, the ultimate authority. And there's another worldview that puts the self as the ultimate authority. And we argue in our book that deconstruction is that worldview. It's the idea that self ultimately determines, and it stands judge over Scripture. I mean, over and over again, you find deconstructions say Paul was wrong, Moses was wrong. They have no trouble. They're not wrestling with the Scriptures. Well, what did Paul mean by that? No, lots these guys are just wanting to say, yeah, the Bible says it and it's wrong. No problem. Let's move on. Well, it's because they think that they can determine what's actually true. And of course, that is absolutely false. And we make that case in the book.

FRANK:

Here's one of the biggest problems, ladies and gentlemen. If you give up an authority outside yourself, you no longer have any warrant to say anything is right or wrong. And yet, that's their entire case against Orthodox Christianity. That somehow, things Christians supposedly do or supposedly believe are immoral. Well, if there's no authority outside of the self, nothing's immoral. Everything's just a matter of opinion. It's just a matter of preference. So, they're losing their ability to somehow indict Christianity, when they become the authority over everything, when they when they reject God, when they reject the true authority.

So, I mean, there's so many problems with it. And they're beautifully unpacked in the book, 'The Deconstruction of Christianity' by my guests today, Alisa Childers and Tim Barnett. Hey, before we go, you guys are going or have gone to Southern Evangelical Seminary, like I did, SES.edu. Say a word or two because a lot of people don't know about SES, and they ought to.

ALISA:

Yeah, well, I'll let Tim pitch in here too. But I'm a forever student at SES. I will probably be taking classes there forever. I'm not currently taking one this semester. But every time I have a little bit of a light schedule, I love to take a class at SES. It's just the greatest Bible College, seminary. They shepherded me through my process, my faith crisis. I found them early on in my faith crisis and started auditing classes. They're just the absolute best. I love that every class has a three-pronged approach of apologetics, theology, and philosophy. So, you get all three of those in every class. And it has just helped my walk with the Lord so, so, so much.

FRANK:

How about you, Tim?

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TIM:

And what they do really well is besides the theology part, is the ability to kind of be in the classroom, but at home. So, when was taking classes, man. It's been a while. I think I enrolled in 2013, did the master's degree in philosophy. And I was able to be livestreamed in there. So, it was like I was sitting at the back of the room. And it was so funny, because when we'd ask a question, we'd just unmute. And like, hey. You know, Professor Howe? And then, you know, Richard Howe, he'd be like, you know, it'd be this kind of big production. But it felt like you were in the room with the other students, because there were students in the room as well. And I think, man, if you can't be there, and a lot of us because of work, or family or whatever, we can't be on location, this is the next best thing.

FRANK:

So, check it out ladies and gentlemen, SES.edu. Also wanted to mention, I think it's this week. Yeah, February 1, I'll be at Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana if you want to be a part of that, I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist. You can go to our website, CrossExamined.org, for more on that. And don't forget about the 'Conversations with the Faiths.' If you want to be able to more effectively interact with Muslims, Mormons, and Jehovah's Witnesses, you need to take that course with Dr. Brady Blevins. It starts on February 5.

The self-paced course you can take anytime you want. Go to CrossExamined.org. Click on Online Courses. We also have the Unshaken conference coming up in both Detroit and Pittsburgh. Me, Alisa, and Natasha Crain will be there. And then, two more things you need to know about. Alisa, myself, Greg Koukl of Stand to Reason, and several others, are going to be in Dayton, Ohio on February 16 and 17th. Go to DaytonApologetics.com for more on that. And then the next weekend in Dallas, Texas, Tim, talk about the Reality conference quickly if people want to be a part of that.

TIM:

Yeah, they're going to want to register for the Reality apologetics conference February 23-24th, happening in North Dallas at Cottonwood Creek Baptist Church. It's going to fill up. It will sell out. I think we're at 2000 students already registered. It is such a good time. Not only are you equipped with kind of the apologetics training, but it's also a ton of fun. In fact, students keep coming back every year. And we're having a hard time just find a facility that can hold enough. So, definitely want to check that out.

FRANK:

What's the website again?

TIM:

RealityApologetics.com

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FRANK:

RealityApologetics.com. By the way, also check out Red Pen Logic and the Alisa Childers podcast in addition to the Unshaken podcast. All that, great resources for you ladies and gentlemen. Alisa, Tim, thanks for the great book, 'The Destruction of Christianity.' Friends, you need to get it. Get it today. Thank you, guys, for being a part of this.

ALISA/TIM:

Thanks, Frank.

FRANK:

Alright, see you here, Lord willing, next week. God bless.

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