

Is the problem that faith is two sizes too small?

Sandra MacDonald

Contact: sandra.macdonald@salvationarmy.org.au

Sandy MacDonald is a Salvation Army officer serving on the faculty of Eva Burrows College, as the Coursework Coordinator. She is currently a candidate for the Doctor of Professional Practice within University of Divinity with a research focus on developing a child-shaped, feminist-informed resource for engaging with bible stories.

Abstract

This article takes a fresh perspective on the contemporary “problem” of deconstruction in evangelical settings by considering the problem before the problem, the construction of faith, in particular during childhood. What issues that may make faith precarious and vulnerable to deconstruction can be addressed during children’s faith formation to make it more resilient to the bumpiness of teenage and adult life? The kinds of characteristics that make faith precarious or “two sizes too small” are faith that is antagonistic, simplistic, or moralistic; reliant on certainty and resistant to questions; and not personally-owned. Instead characteristics of resilient faith or faith that fits are being elastic, open to questions, and allowing for mystery; formed in community; and takes children’s faith seriously and acknowledges them as active meaning-makers. By shifting the focus, this article offers a formative theological approach, rather than being anti-deconstructionist.

Keywords: faith-formation, children's spirituality, deconstruction, resilient-faith

Introduction

An issue of concern for some (evangelical) churches today, including The Salvation Army, is people deconstructing faith. People may deconstruct when they discover the faith they hold is insufficient to deal with their own or a loved one’s lived experience, the complexity of the world in general, contravenes their closely held values, or they become disillusioned with the institution of church. Deconstruction may be followed

by reconstruction, where some elements of faith are retained while others are discarded, or alternative theologies or practices embraced that better align with their expanded worldview or lived experience. Destruction or abandonment may also be the subsequent phase to deconstruction.

How might we respond to deconstruction? Do we do all in our power to prevent it? Do we double-down and shout louder against anything we might consider a risk or an adversary? Do we go back to fix the foundations; the construction of faith? Or is no response needed?

After outlining the “problem” of deconstruction, this paper will consider whether the real problem is the construction stage: since logically, deconstruction is preceded by construction¹ Children’s faith formation is the lens that will be applied. David Goodwin (2013) concluded that “Children need to be better prepared for challenges to their faith that will inevitably come” (p. 14). Thirteen years on, the need is still urgent, perhaps more so in a climate of deconstruction. What if children’s faith could be nurtured in such a way that does not inevitably lead to a devastating unravelling during the bumpiness of adult life? Could children’s faith be developed in more resilient ways, that also sees deconstruction less as a problem and more as part of a lifelong, maturing relationship with God?

What is the problem of deconstruction?

Deconstruction is a popular term to describe the process of examining, reassessing, unlearning, and dismantling Christian beliefs, practices, and identity.²

Deconstructing faith usually occurs in response to some kind of crisis but could be a slow reach of the tipping point; it may be a violent or gentle process. The language of deconstruction largely belongs to the evangelical/post-evangelical sphere with analogous processes taking place in other Christian traditions (framed using other language and typically with less drama and fear attached): the experience is not

¹ I am not fond of the bricks-and-mortar imagery implied by deconstruction as it emphasises human activity in relation to faith, sidelining the divine role. As deconstruction is the common term in evangelical circles, I will employ it and its logical counterparts here.

² The term deconstruction as used in this paper is from the evangelical/post-evangelical popular debate. Deconstruction has origins in Jacques Derrida (1983) but the context here is the Christian faith and, as such, I will not delve into the post-structuralist philosophical origins of deconstruction.

limited to evangelicals but the intensity is heightened in this setting. Much of the discussion takes place in the USA, sometimes attaching the label exvangelical to a person who has deconstructed and left the faith (Mullins, 2023). The language and conversation is increasingly infiltrating the Australian context.

Youth and young adults are the most visible cohort deconstructing, but it is not an issue isolated to this demographic.³ According to Rowan Lewis (2013), “It should be no surprise that the presence of doubt, questioning, experimentation, challenging authority and seeking independence in relation to faith should also be present during this time as these young people seek to make sense of their faith and find meaning in the context of this challenging life stage” (p. 53). Another prominent group is women during mid-life (Mathieu, 2024). Across both these groups it appears that deconstruction is more prevalent among those who were deeply invested in their faith and active in their faith community, than those who believed nominally or engaged superficially. They are often biblically or theologically literate but experience dissonance between their faith and their lived experience.

Perhaps deconstruction might be thought of like a game of Jenga (Scott, 1983). In Jenga, people take turns poking or pulling a block from the tower then adding it to the top, creating new layers of the tower. At some point, the removal of a block or its placement destabilises the whole tower bringing it crashing down. Some blocks are chosen, removed, and placed carefully while others might be hastily and recklessly moved. Imagining that each block holds within it an element of Christian belief or practice, we might say that poking or pulling at a block before placing it at a new location, is like deconstructing an element of faith. In this sense, deconstructing might simply be understood as carefully examining. Some elements are unlikely to topple the tower when removed and re-placed, other elements may be so critical to stability that simply removing them to examine them leads to demolition, for others it is the act of placing them that unbalances the tower, and for still others it is the cumulative impact of eroding foundations that cause the tower to collapse. For some people it is one thing that is just too hard to reconcile and fit back into their faith world safely while for others lots of little things compound. The people with whom

³ I typically use the word youth to depict the life stage of adolescence (13-17), occasionally substituting teen or teenager. I use young adult for the age group 18-25, although some literature prefers emerging adult. Youth and young adult are the usual nomenclature of my context, The Salvation Army.

you are playing also impact the stability of the tower; Jenga is not usually a solo game.

The critical question is, “What happens next?” If deconstruction has led to destruction or abandonment, it might be “game over.” However, the alternative is to start again and reassemble (reconstruct). Sometimes, blocks go missing! It is possible to play the game with fewer blocks, whether they have been accidentally lost or intentionally discarded.

The concern of today’s church is likely more about people abandoning faith than deconstructing it, as I understand deconstruction. Deconstructing (examining, reassessing, unlearning, and dismantling) faith may lead to apostasy but on the contrary may lead to stronger faith (reconstruction or renovation). Precarious faith (faith that is too-small, brittle, malformed, or inadequate) is more susceptible to being abandoned once a person starts deconstructing it. For some who have “grown up with” faith, perhaps they allowed their faith to remain simplistic, compliant, and behaviour-based, which quickly proves precarious in the complex, nuanced world of adulthood?

Side note: The fusion of evangelicalism with politics in the USA is less evident in places like Australia. When The Salvation Army, an international movement, declares itself “an evangelical part of the Christian church” (The Salvation Army International, n.d.), it is not making a statement of political affiliation but of missional motivation. Nevertheless, Matthew Mullins (2023) observes that the alliance between evangelical churches in the USA and conservative politics “serves as the backdrop” (p. 249), and this does influence further afield. As such, it is helpful to consider the context in which the word evangelical is being used to assess the degree of possible entanglement with politics.

While a person may come to faith at any age in life, childhood is the primary period during which people become Christian.⁴ The 12-and-under age group was identified

⁴ Barna Group found that “the spiritual allegiances of childhood are remarkably sustainable” (“Do Americans Change Faiths?,” 2010). In the same vein, in Australia, David Goodwin (2013, p. 17) discovered that 77% of adult Christians were involved in a children’s ministry as a child. He also noted that if they enjoyed their time in children’s ministry, they were more likely to remain Christian as

as a missional priority by George Barna (2003), who concluded that “if people do not embrace Jesus Christ as their Savior before they reach their teenage years, the chance of their doing so at all is slim” (p. 34). This statistical evidence has enduring impact on children’s ministry and the value ascribed to evangelism among children. If childhood is the main “entry door” to Christian faith, teenage and young adulthood are a corresponding “exit door,” as these years are a prime period during which people abandon the faith they grew up with.

Questioning, disengaging, and reconfiguring faith by teenagers and young adults is not new. The challenge of young people walking away from faith (and/or the church) is widely substantiated, and the Australian data is largely consistent with that from overseas.⁵ Sometimes disengaging from church and disengaging from faith are erroneously treated as the same thing; one may lead to the other but not necessarily so.⁶ While the language of deconstruction is not used in such research, the issue is a longstanding challenge for faith formation. This concern has prompted reconsideration of approaches to ministry with youth and young adults, and also with children.⁷ A both-and approach is helpful. We should reassess and reinvigorate faith formation at all ages to better form lifelong faith.

Deconstruction of faith during teen, young adult or later adult years provides impetus for re-evaluating the construction of faith undertaken during childhood, which is the focus of this paper. How might we form faith in children that is resilient, not precarious, and able to withstand the factors that would threaten to topple it? This takes a formative theological approach to the issue of deconstruction, rather than being anti-deconstructionist. It is not seeking to improve the production line

adults (Goodwin, 2013, p. 18).

⁵ Australian empirical research includes Bellamy & Kaldor (2002, pp. 6, 23); Goodwin (2013); Hughes (2007); Mason et al. (2007); Singleton et al., (2019), and the phenomenon is also well-documented in North America by Black (2008); Ham et al., (2009); Kinnaman & Hawkins (2011); Powell & Clark (2011); Sawler (2008); and Smith & Denton (2005).

⁶ The distinction is clear in the “nomad” and “exile” designations from Kinnaman (2011, p. 25) and the current deconstruction discourse. Darren Cronshaw (2016, pp. 18-20, 23) argues strongly against conflating disengagement or dissociation with church with disidentification or deidentification with faith. Drawing on data from the 2024 Springtide Study of Young People and Religious Life, Nabil Tueme (2025) notes that 65% of young people who leave religious institutions say they are “still moderately religious.”

⁷ Fuller Youth Institute (Powell et al., 2016; Powell & Argue, 2019; Powell & Clark, 2011) is a leader in the youth and young adult age group. Ivy Beckwith (2010) was one of the first to reimagine children’s ministry in response to malformed faith of teenagers and young adults, see (Beckwith, 2010)

between children's ministry and everything beyond but rather to restructure from an earlier point in time that improves faith resilience at every age.

Precarious faith

What kind of characteristics make children's faith precarious, leaving it vulnerable to deconstruction or destruction?⁸ Perhaps a person discovers that their faith is "two sizes too small," to adapt a concept from Dr Seuss' *The Grinch?* (Geisel, 2003). Alternatively, someone's faith may be brittle, fragile, relegated to the status belief which must be outgrown, or perhaps it was never truly theirs to begin with.

A too-small faith might be antagonistic; everything is a possible threat or enemy. It is suspicious of the next pop culture wave that arrives, especially if it contains spiritual overtones like *Harry Potter*, *Wicked*, or *Kpop Demon Hunters*. Too-small faith is also threatened by actual culture, viewing things like smoking ceremonies or Acknowledgement of Country as an affront to Christian faith. It cannot readily navigate real-world issues faced by the child (or adult) such as divorce, racism, patriarchy, violence or war, gender and sexuality diversity, for example, as the faith is too simplistic or moralistic.

Faulty or malformed faith is precarious. Moralistic faith, where everything needs to tie up with a neat moral lesson is inadequate. Ivy Beckwith (2004) warns against "[diluting] the power of the Bible to pique a child's curiosity and sense of wonder and awe about the mysteries of God" when we use it to teach political, theological, or moral lessons (p. 131). Moralistic faith may be informed more from Disney animation than the Bible. Mark Pinsky (2004) claims that Walt Disney's animated "gospel," while loosely based on Western Judeo-Christian faith and ideals, reveals a world where "good is always rewarded; evil is always punished. Faith is an essential element—faith in yourself and, even more, faith in something *greater* than yourself, some higher power. Optimism and hard work complete the basic canon" (pp. xi-xii).⁹ Pinsky (2004, p. 6-7) calls this approach "secular 'toonism": movies with apparent, if watered-down, religious moral values.¹⁰ Moralistic therapeutic deism (MTD) as

⁸ The word precarious avoids blaming children for the issue of non-resilient faith instead locating responsibility with the system of formation.

⁹ Pinsky (2004, p. 1) notes that Disney was adamant not to overtly include any religion in his movies which protected commercial interests by not excluding or offending anyone.

¹⁰ This is an adaption of the pejorative "secular humanism."

identified by Christian Smith and Melinda Denton (2005, pp. 162-163) is malformed Christianity, where faith is focused on feeling good about oneself and being socially respectable (a “good citizen”), with God relegated to a support role. MTD is ripe for deconstruction.

A too-small faith may be brittle or fragile. Brittle faith relies on certainty and resists questions, thus gripping to fundamentalist or literal ideas. On the surface this kind of faith may appear strong (loud and proud) but shatters under duress or if the “right” answer cannot be found. Mariko Clark reflected on her experience as a five-year-old being trained in a cerebral, cognitive method where the Bible was a defensive tool: “learning, agreeing, memorising was the extent of it.” Instead she wants to introduce her own children to a bigger God who is “able to grow and bend with them” to overcome a “small and brittle understanding of God” (Enns et al., 2025). It is entirely appropriate for a child’s young faith to be fragile needing protection and additional nurture. The concern is when that fragility extends beyond childhood, suggesting poor construction, structural weakness, or overprotectiveness.

Another too-small kind of faith is one that assigns Jesus the same status as childhood fabricated figures, such as Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny, belief in which we outgrow at an appropriate age.

Faith that is precarious may be implanted faith; someone else’s faith, not personally-owned. This is like a child “cosplaying” Christianity or going through the motions; they may participate in the activities of faith in nominal or superficial ways but lack personal volition. Faith that is not your own is easily rejected, discarded or put on the shelf.

Resilient faith

What instead makes children’s faith resilient and capable of theological load-bearing? What are we aiming for? What can we do better? The markers of resilient faith are not merely the opposite characteristic of every precarious one identified above, although some clearly stand in contrast. Resilient faith fits well and is elastic, open to questions and allowing for mystery. It is formed in community with parents and the faith community, peers and intergenerational relationships. I would also

argue that resilient faith is one that takes children's faith seriously and recognises them as active agents.

Faith that fits, not two sizes too small, is resilient. Recognising that development is not a linear process, psychologists and sociologists have moved away from step-wise progression (Byas, 2025). This means that developmental models of faith like James Fowler's (1995) stages of faith may still provide some insight to the way people engage in faith as long as it is viewed somewhat flexibly.¹¹ John Westerhoff's (2012, pp. 82-83) styles of faith is an expansive framework moving from experienced faith to affiliative faith, through searching faith to owned faith (which integrates all the earlier styles). He uses the analogy of the rings on a tree: "A tree in its first year is a complete and whole tree, and a tree with three rings is not a better tree but only an expanded tree" (Westerhoff, 2012, pp. 82–83). We need not expect a child to have moved beyond Fowler's mythical-literal stage or expanded into Westerhoff's searching or owned faith styles.¹² We need much more than a process of getting children to cross the line from non-believer to believer by "praying the prayer" (Beckwith, 2004, p. 62). What we can do is set them up well to keep growing and be prepared for the world they encounter, not limiting them to an early stage or style in a constrictive way.

Elastic faith is able to grow and stretch. Young people are asking critical questions earlier in life (Byas, 2025). Kara Powell proclaims: "Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving" (Powell, 2014). Further, Mariko Clark contends that "questioning and mystery and wrestling is actually good and productive and positive, and not a sign of some sort of shortcoming or failure or a watered down version of relationship with God" (Enns et al., 2025). Questions and doubts are not threats to be eliminated but realities to be anticipated and courageously engaged.

¹¹ Fowler's stages of faith progress from a pre-stage of undifferentiated faith (infancy) through intuitive-projective faith (early childhood), mythical-literal faith (school years), synthetic-conventional faith (adolescence), individuative-reflective faith (young adulthood), conjunctive faith (mid-life and beyond), to universalising faith (rarely achieved!) (Fowler, 1995, p. 113 Chapters on each stage follow. 117-211).

¹² Angela Patterson says it is possible Generation Z may progress through the stages faster as they are exposed to more information and experiences on a mass scale than previous generations (Byas, 2025).

Resilient faith is formed in community. Ivy Beckwith claims that “God surrounded children with adults both in the extended biological family and the community of faith ... to guide, teach, and model life for our children. ... No child can truly come to know God without the influence of caring, godly adults in her life” (Beckwith, 2004, p. 68). She also affirms that all aspects of having faith (understanding, exploring, and questioning) “are meant to be done with people older than us, the same age as us, and younger than us [and] with people who look, think, and live differently than we do (Beckwith, 2004, p.74). The importance of a connection with peers is also vital (Goodwin, 2013, p. 9; Here2Stay, 2015; MacDonald, 2020, p. 68). Faith that is supported jointly from home and church and sustained by peer and intergenerational relationships will evidence more resilience.

Children are theological meaning-makers. David Csinos (2011) headlines the argument that children are “active agents who make meaning for themselves and the world around them” (p. 12). Acknowledging the inherent spirituality of children and affirming their faith as real and valuable now, is a step towards resilience.

The foregoing discussion strengthens my previous argument that “a true inheritance of faith is passing on the seeds of faith and nurturing the soil to give young people every opportunity to grow their own personal faith, embracing Jesus for themselves” (MacDonald, 2020, pp. 88–89). The organic imagery of nurturing seeds of faith that grow is more helpful than picturing faith being constructed by blocks or bricks.

Conclusion

Deconstruction of itself need not spark fear. It can be viewed as a necessary and important part of maturation, and does not always lead to apostasy. However, it can lead us to consider what makes faith precarious or resilient, and what implications this may have for children’s faith formation.

To avoid developing faith that is two sizes too small, our children’s ministry needs:

- Less certainty, more openness, curiosity, and wonder.
- Less rigidity, brittleness, and fragility, more elasticity.
- Less answers, more questions and mystery.

- Less moralism and behaviour conformity, more transformation.
- Less cosplay and superficially going through the motions, more authenticity and honouring children's theological agency.
- Less isolation, more community with parents, the faith community, peers and intergenerational relationships.
- Less transmission/transaction of passing on faith, more offering the seeds of faith.

Let us not settle for constructing precarious faith in children that is two sizes too small. Rather let us nurture children's faith that can grow three sizes in a day if needed in order to navigate the inevitable bumpiness of days ahead.

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