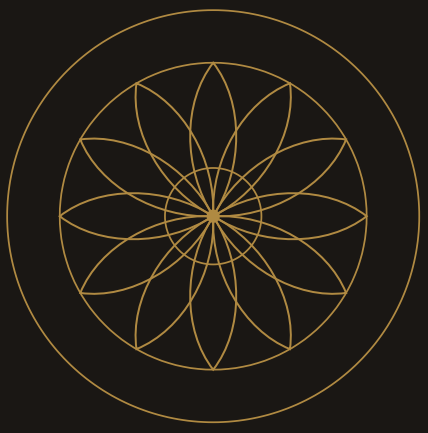


THE SACRED DIVIDE

THE FULL RECORD

Christianity

Christianity family

HONOR THE FAITH · NAME THE MACHINERY

TEXT CHECKED 2026-10-03

Before you begin

This is the record of Christianity in *The Sacred Divide*. It has 27 sections, the same 27 used for every tradition, so that any section can be set beside the same section for another. Every fact is sourced.

Before each section, a short note says what the section is built to show, so you know what you are looking at before you read the detail.

After each section, a note headed *Why this matters to you* points at the part of the section most likely to touch an ordinary reader: a member, a donor, a parent, a voter, someone thinking about leaving, or someone outside forming an opinion. It usually ends with a question. The questions are not traps. They are the ones a careful reader would ask anyway.

The hard questions in section 23 are set out one at a time: the question, why it is asked, and an example already documented in this record.

Where a note states a fact, the fact comes from this record's own tables and cited sources or, in a few places, from a well-known research finding named in the text. Corrections are logged, with their dates, in the last section, *What changed on this page*.

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How to read this

Every religion in The Sacred Divide is laid out the same way, in the same 27 sections, so that any section can be compared across religions. This file examines institutions, offices, money and power. It does not judge anyone's faith or the truth of any belief.

EVIDENCE GRADES

Each of the 30 techniques carries a grade for how it is established in this tradition.

- **CODIFIED** Written policy, published rule, contractual requirement, or a procedure the institution has confirmed in its own documents. The strongest grade and the hardest to deny.
- **DOCUMENTED** Established by court judgment, government inquiry, regulatory action, or financial filing. Not the institution's own words, but a body with subpoena power.
- **TAUGHT** Repeated leadership instruction from platform, publication, or curriculum, without a formal rule. Deniable as emphasis rather than policy.
- **CULTURAL** Community enforcement the institution neither mandates nor prevents. Real in effect, unattributable by design — the highest-deniability grade. A volume graded mostly Cultural has not been cleared of anything: it means the page names no document that makes the institution responsible. Cultural does not mean minor, and it is not a finding of absence.

- CONTESTED Occurs in some parts of the tradition and is actively opposed in others. Generalizing this grade across a whole tradition is a misuse of it.
- REFORMED Documented historically and materially changed since — policy withdrawn, practice ended, or independent oversight accepted. Recorded because omitting it would be dishonest.
- UNGRADED Present in the source material without a grade assigned yet. Read as an unverified pattern claim, not as a finding.

RECEIPTS

Bracketed labels such as [OFFICIAL POLICY] name the kind of source a claim rests on.

- **Official policy.** The institution's own written rule: handbook, canon, policy letter, catechism, trust deed, temple recommend question. The strongest evidence available, because it cannot be attributed to a rogue individual.
- **Court record.** Judgments, convictions, filings, and testimony given under oath. Adversarially tested, which is more than most religious claims about themselves have been.
- **Government inquiry.** Royal commissions, grand juries, parliamentary and state investigations with subpoena power. Where these exist they are usually the best record of what an institution did rather than said.
- **Regulatory action.** Findings and penalties from bodies like the SEC or consumer-protection regulators. Narrow in scope, unusually precise in what they establish.
- **Financial record.** Filings, audited statements, tax returns, disclosed compensation, property transactions. Frequently the only place an institution tells the truth about its priorities.

- **Leadership statement.** Recorded sermons, conference addresses, published letters. The institution in its own voice, to its own people, on the record.
- **Independent investigation.** Reports commissioned by the institution but conducted externally. Weaker than a court and far stronger than a press release — and notable when the institution publishes them in full.
- **Academic source.** Peer-reviewed history, sociology, and demography. Best for context, structure, and scale; weaker for specific institutional conduct.
- **Former member testimony.** Firsthand accounts from people who were inside. Indispensable and interested at once — graded as testimony, never presented as documentary proof.
- **Pattern observed.** A recurring configuration with no single document behind it. Labeled as an observation rather than a finding, and the weakest claim type in this codex.

METHOD

- Separation of targets. This codex analyzes institutional control patterns, never the worth of believers or the truth of beliefs. Theology is out of scope; behavior, money, and power are in scope.
- Pattern over anecdote. A tactic is attributed to a tradition's high-control expressions only where the mechanism recurs — one bad congregation proves nothing; the same architecture in a hundred proves the architecture.
- Evidence weighting. Every factual claim carries a bracketed source-type label and should carry a grade (A–D). Claims marked SOURCE NEEDED or PATTERN OBSERVED are analysis, not established fact, and must not be published as fact.
- Steelman rule. Every tactic section presents the institution's strongest defense before countering it. If the defense cannot be stated in a form its adherents would recognize, the counter is not yet earned.

- Asymmetry honesty. Similar tactic does not mean identical severity. A shunning policy that costs your entire family is not the same as a community that cools toward doubters, and the codex must never flatten that difference.
- The mirror rule. Any framework this powerful can itself be misused — to smear traditions, flatter one's own, or manufacture grievance. The self-audit and language guardrails apply to this project as much as to any institution it examines.

CITATIONS

A small raised number in the text links to the matching item in this religion's Sources, near the end. Every source was checked, and the date of the last check is shown at the top.

01 At a glance

BEFORE YOU READ

The whole page on one screen: how big Christianity is, who sits at the top, how that person is chosen and whether anyone can remove them, where the money comes from, and what leaving costs. The disclosure scorecard underneath asks six yes-or-no questions any charity or public company would be expected to answer. Every later section expands one of these rows.

SIZE	Christianity has ~2.3–2.4 billion adherents, the largest religious family on earth. **ACADEMIC SOURCE** · Pew, World Religion Database
WHO'S IN CHARGE	No one leads Christianity as a whole. The largest single office is the Bishop of Rome (the pope), who leads 1.4 billion Catholics; it is held by Leo XIV (Robert Francis Prevost), elected in May 2025 after the death of Francis.
CHOSEN BY	A conclave of cardinals, every one appointed by a previous pope.
REMOVABLE BY	No body on earth. Canon law contains no removal procedure for a pope.
MONEY IN ONE LINE	The money comes from tithes and offerings (often taught as 10% pre-tax), building campaigns, missions funds, book and media sales, and school tuition.

LEAVING IN ONE LINE	Leaving can cost a person their community and social network and strain their family, and in high-control congregations it can bring formal shunning or 'church discipline' (a formal process of censure that can end in expulsion) announcements.
THE UNANSWERED QUESTION	The largest charitable sector legally exempt from public accounts mostly does not file voluntarily. What, exactly, would disclosure cost — and to whom?
EVIDENCE	Four of the 30 techniques are sourced to a named document. The grades are Taught 15, Cultural 11, Documented 3 and Codified 1.
FAMILY	Christianity — christianity, catholicism, eastern-orthodoxy, oriental-orthodoxy, anglicanism, protestant-evangelical, pentecostal-charismatic, plymouth-brethren
LAST CHECKED	2026-10-03

Disclosure scorecard

ACCOUNTS	PAY	SAFEGUARDING	EXTERNAL FIRST	REMOVAL	REPLY
PARTIAL	NO	PARTIAL	PARTIAL	PARTIAL	PARTIAL

Y Yes — established from a public source · **P** Partial — true of some parts of the tradition, or true in some jurisdictions · **N** No — not established from any public source · **?** Not assessable — no institutional apex exists to assess

WHY THIS MATTERS TO YOU

The glance table's answer to who chooses the top office is "A conclave of cardinals, every one appointed by a previous pope", and to who can remove its holder, "No body on earth. Canon law contains no removal procedure for a pope". Read that as though it described the board of a pension fund holding your savings. Would you accept the arrangement there? The scorecard finds no public evidence of leaders' pay. Each "No" is something the institution could publish tomorrow. Ask yourself why it hasn't.

02 A day inside

BEFORE YOU READ

One ordinary day, told from inside. The person is a composite built from documented patterns, not a real individual. The point is to make the structure visible at human scale: phrases like "removal mechanism" or "giving record" are easy to read past, but a Tuesday organized around them is not.

Dana · A Tuesday in October · A suburb of a mid-sized American city

She wakes at 4:52 without the alarm, which has been happening for about a year now. Nine minutes of lying still, then the thought arrives that she should be using this time to pray, and then the

second thought, that noticing she should be praying instead of praying is its own kind of failure. She gets up.

The tithe envelope is on the counter where she left it Sunday. Two hundred and forty dollars, which is ten percent, which is also the car insurance. She has done this arithmetic four times and it comes out the same way each time. Pastor Rick preached on Malachi (the Old Testament book that calls withholding the tithe robbing God) three weeks ago — *will a man rob God* — and she remembers the particular way the room went quiet. She puts the envelope in her purse.

At 7:15 she texts her small-group leader (the church member who leads her weekly home Bible-study group) that she is doing fine. She is not doing fine. But Marla will pray about it, and Marla will mention it to Denise, and Denise's husband is on the elder board (the lay leaders who govern the church), and Dana has watched what happens to a woman in this church who becomes someone people are concerned about.

Lunch. She eats in her car so she can read something on her phone that she would not open at her desk — an article about a church in another state, a pastor, a settlement, non-disclosure agreements. Her chest does something. She closes it. On the drive back she prays for the woman in the article and then, without deciding to, prays for forgiveness for reading it.

Her daughter Emma is eleven and asks at dinner whether Grandpa Ray is in hell. Ray drank and did not believe in anything and died in March. Dana hears herself say that God is merciful and that we leave those things with Him. Emma says okay in the voice that means she has understood that the answer is yes and that asking again is not permitted. Dana lies awake later replaying it.

At 9:40 her husband asks whether the insurance went through. She says she is handling it. He nods, because she does handle it, and because they do not talk about the envelope. She puts her phone on the nightstand face down and lies in the dark thinking that she is tired in a way that sleep does

not seem to reach, and that this is probably a spiritual problem, and that she should be praying about it.

WHY THIS MATTERS TO YOU

Did any moment in that day feel familiar: a cost nobody questions, a door nobody can see how to open? The section of this page that explains that moment is the one to read first. If nothing felt familiar, ask whether that's because it isn't your life, or because the patterns have become normal to you.

03 The forefront

BEFORE YOU READ

The page's thesis in one place. First, the single question the documented record could not answer. Then the widest gap between what the institution says and what the record shows, one cost of leaving set beside how it is officially denied, and the strongest objection to this whole page, answered rather than dismissed.

> If you grew up in this, you were probably loved in it too. Someone brought your family food when your mother was sick. Someone sat with you when you were nineteen and terrified. Hold onto that while you read — it is real, and it is not the thing being examined here. What is being examined is why the same community that fed your family also taught you that questioning it endangers your soul.

THE UNANSWERED QUESTION

The largest charitable sector legally exempt from public accounts mostly does not file voluntarily. What, exactly, would disclosure cost — and to whom?

The widest gap between word and record

THEY SAY	THE RECORD SHOWS	RECEIPT
We are a family here.	Families do not have a membership covenant (a signed agreement setting out a member's obligations to the church), a discipline procedure, or a category of person who is announced from the front and then not spoken to.	PATTERN OBSERVED

One cost of leaving, beside its denial

COST	DOCUMENTED?	DETAIL	THE OFFICIAL DENIAL
Family and community loss	Often	Relationships cool, and high-control congregations make formal 'church discipline' announcements.	“Nobody is stopping them — that's their choice.”

The strongest objection, answered

The objection. You are generalizing from two billion people and thousands of denominations.

What is true in it. It is a fair charge. There is no single Christian institution, and a Quaker meeting, a Coptic parish, and a Texas megachurch have almost nothing structurally in common. Any claim that treats them as one body is wrong.

The answer. So this profile names structures rather than the faith: the independent church with a founder-appointed board, the disclosure exemption, the specific policy. Where a claim applies only to some branches it says so, and the health section names the congregations that pass. If a sentence here reads as a claim about all Christians, it is a defect.

WHY THIS MATTERS TO YOU

Try answering the unanswered question yourself: *The largest charitable sector legally exempt from public accounts mostly does not file voluntarily. What, exactly, would disclosure cost — and to whom?* If you can't, who could, and would asking them be welcome? How an institution reacts to a fair question often tells you more than the answer does.

04 What healthy looks like here

BEFORE YOU READ

What genuinely works in Christianity, stated first and separately from any critique. That is a standing rule of this book: no tradition is reduced to its worst documented moments. Anything criticized later is measured against the best of what is described here.

> Christianity is the world's largest religious family (~2.3–2.4 billion adherents), centered on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. It spans thousands of denominations, from Catholic and Orthodox to Protestant, Pentecostal (churches centered on the gifts of the Holy Spirit, such as healing and speaking in tongues) and independent churches.

Healthy practice here looks like congregations that publish their budgets, have independent boards and term-limited leadership, and report abuse to outside authorities.

Some denominations have commissioned independent abuse investigations and published them. The Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) commissioned the 2022 report by Guidepost Solutions, an independent investigations firm, under pressure from its members, and the report was published [8]. INVESTIGATIVE REPORT

The tradition has its own history of dissent from within: the abolitionists, the Confessing Church (German Protestants who resisted Nazi control of the churches) and the sanctuary movements.

Some of that standard is already on the record. Evangelical journalists at *Christianity Today* reported in depth on the collapse of Mars Hill, a church in their own movement [11], and MinistryWatch, an evangelical watchdog, has rated ministries on donor transparency since 1998 [10]. Each is a place where members of the tradition met the standard this page applies, and each is recorded here as credit.

Sources for this section: [8] [10] [11]

WHY THIS MATTERS TO YOU

A bias check before the critique. People tend to read criticism of their own group as an attack and criticism of other groups as simply true. Social psychologists call this in-group bias; it shows up even when the groups are assigned at random (Tajfel's "minimal group" experiments, 1971). If you belong here, did this section feel fair? If you don't, did anything in it surprise you? The surprise is a rough measure of what you had assumed.

05 History

BEFORE YOU READ

A dated timeline and a few moments where the direction changed. Dates matter because they show that most rules had a beginning. A rule that began in a particular year, for a particular reason, is a rule that can be examined, and sometimes retired.

Christianity began in 1st-century Roman Judea as the Jesus movement within Second Temple Judaism (the Judaism of the period before the Jerusalem Temple was destroyed in 70 CE). Its scriptures and creeds took shape across the 2nd–4th centuries. Under Constantine and Theodosius (4th c.) it became the Roman imperial religion, fusing spiritual and state authority at imperial scale.

Timeline

HISTORY AT A GLANCE



Numbered markers match the timeline below; spacing is proportional to the years.

1 **C. 30–33 CE**

The Jesus movement begins in Roman Judea

A spiritual claim exists with no institution, no clergy, and no treasury.

2 **C. 33–70 CE**

Apostolic mission across the Mediterranean; house churches

Growth requires coordination — the first authority disputes appear (Acts 15, Galatians).

3 **C. 50–120 CE**

Letters and gospels written and circulated

Texts become the reference point; whoever interprets them acquires leverage.

4 **C. 100–250 CE**

Bishops, presbyters (elders, the office that became the priesthood), and deacons formalize; persecution episodes

Leadership becomes an office rather than a charisma — offices outlive people.

5

313–380 CE

Constantine's toleration; Theodosius makes Christianity the imperial religion

The single most consequential event in this codex: spiritual authority fuses with state coercion.

6

325–787 CE

Ecumenical councils (councils of bishops from across the church, called to settle doctrine) define creed and canon

Belief becomes standardized and dissent becomes prosecutable heresy.

7

1054 / 1517

East–West Schism; Protestant Reformation

Authority disputes become permanent institutional divisions.

8

1500S–1900S

Colonial-era missions worldwide

The faith spreads bound to empire, trade, and land seizure.

9

1900S

Pentecostalism, radio and television ministry, the megachurch

Charisma scales; a single leader can now reach millions with no bishop above him.

10

1980S–PRESENT

Global abuse revelations, financial scandals, Global South majority

Christianity's center of gravity moves south while Northern institutions face reckoning.

Moments in the room

312–325 — THE BISHOPS ARRIVE BY IMPERIAL POST

Constantine summoned the bishops to Nicaea and paid their travel out of the imperial treasury. Men who had been an illegal sect within living memory arrived at a state council on the state's coin, to settle doctrine under the eye of an emperor who had not yet been baptised.

Why it matters. It was the moment a persecuted movement acquired the machinery of the state that had persecuted it. Everything the codex documents about Christian institutional power descends from this arrangement, not from the Sermon on the Mount.

1517 — A PRICE LIST, AND A REPLY TO IT

Johann Tetzel was selling indulgences with a published tariff and a jingle about coins and souls. Luther's Ninety-Five Theses open on repentance. Thesis 86 repeats a question Luther says laypeople were asking: why the Pope, richer than Crassus, builds St Peter's with the money of poor believers rather than his own [29].

Why it matters. One of the Reformation's opening questions was an accounting question. Five centuries later, the same question about the same sector still cannot be answered with a document in most jurisdictions.

1969 — THE EXEMPTION THAT WAS NEVER REVISITED

The annual Form 990 return, required of tax-exempt organisations since 1943, exempted religious bodies from the start. In 1969 Congress narrowed that exemption for everyone else — and kept it

for churches. It has stood ever since [34].

Why it matters. One drafting decision is why an American can read the accounts of a food bank and not of a church with a billion-dollar portfolio. It is a statute, not a law of nature, and it can be amended.

Sources for this section: [16] [29] [34]

WHY THIS MATTERS TO YOU

Pick one rule that shapes your week and look for it on the timeline. If it has a start date, it was decided by people at a particular moment, for reasons of that moment. Were you taught it as timeless? What would it mean for you if it turned out to be younger than your grandparents' grandparents?

Its scriptures and creeds took shape across the 2nd–4th centuries.

06 Branches & variants

BEFORE YOU READ

Christianity is not one bloc. This section maps the main branches and variants, so that nothing documented about one community is read as true of all of them.

The main branches are Catholic (~1.4B), Protestant and Evangelical (~800M, up to 1B on wider definitions) and Orthodox (~260M, Eastern and Oriental together), plus Restorationist (movements that aim to restore what they see as the church of the apostles) and independent movements.

Sources for this section: [14] [15] [35]

BRANCH	SIZE	WHERE AUTHORITY SITS
Catholic	The Catholic Church counts ~1.4 billion baptized members [14].	Authority sits with a pope, who is "judged by no one" [5].
Eastern Orthodox	Together with the Oriental Orthodox, they number ~260 million [15].	Authority sits with self-governing national churches and their synods (governing councils of bishops).
Oriental Orthodox	They are counted within the Orthodox total [15].	Authority sits with the Coptic, Ethiopian, Armenian, Syriac and other patriarchates (self-governing churches, each under its own head).
Anglican	The Anglican churches form a worldwide communion.	Authority sits with bishops and synods. In England the church is established (recognized in law as the state church), with 26 bishops in the House of Lords [17].
Protestant / Evangelical	They number hundreds of millions, across thousands of bodies.	Authority ranges from elected conventions to independent congregations with no one above the pastor.
Pentecostal & Charismatic	It is the fastest-growing segment. Pew counted about 584 million Pentecostal and charismatic Christians in 2011, spread across all the branches above and not a separate share of the total [35].	Authority often sits with a founder and a board the founder appoints.

Christians number about **2.3 billion** (2020), the largest religious family on earth [13].

WHY THIS MATTERS TO YOU

If you know one community of Christianity, you know one community. Most bad generalizations about a religion, and most unfair defenses of it, come from treating one branch as the whole. Which branch is the one you picture when you hear the name? Is that picture yours, or one you were given by news coverage or by the community itself?

07 Structure

BEFORE YOU READ

The organizational chart: how many people and institutions there are, where authority sits, who holds the top office, and who holds what beneath it. The question to keep in mind is simple: if the person at the top got something badly wrong, what written procedure exists to correct or remove them?

Size and shape

Adherents	Christianity has ~2.3–2.4 billion adherents, the largest religious family on earth. ACADEMIC SOURCE · Pew, World Religion Database
Regions	Christians are concentrated in Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, Europe and North America, and their numbers are growing in parts of Asia.
Trend	Institutional affiliation is declining in Western Europe and North America, and growth is strong in sub-Saharan Africa and parts of Asia. Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity is the fastest-growing segment.
Participation	The gap between identity and institutional participation is enormous: many countries report majority Christian identity with single-digit weekly attendance. Adherent counts overstate how many people are actually under institutional authority.

Authority

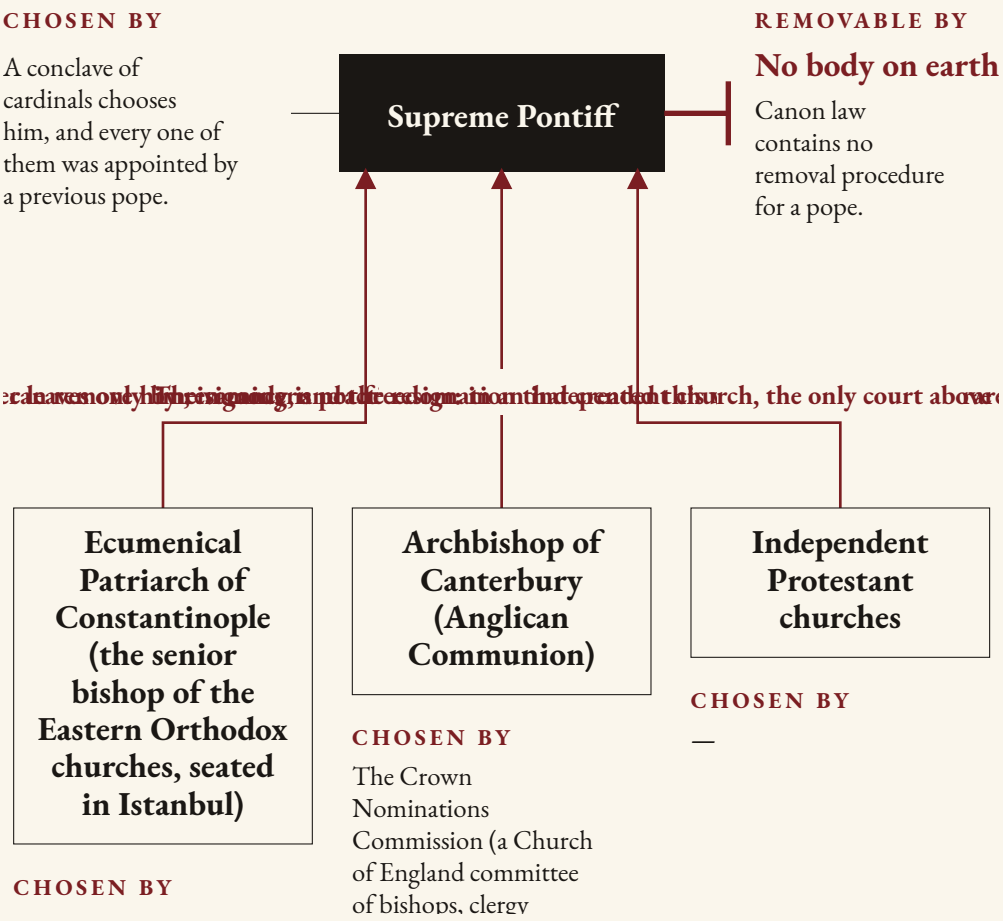
- Authority varies by branch. It may sit with episcopal hierarchies (governed by bishops), presbyterian councils (governed by elected elders), congregational votes, or unaccountable founder-pastors.
- In practice, authority concentrates wherever one office controls doctrine, membership, discipline, and money simultaneously — the highest-risk configuration is the independent church with a founder who answers to a board he appointed.

- The gatekeeping powers are baptism, communion, membership standing, marriage officiation, burial, and the label 'in good standing.'

The top of the chain

> There is no single chair. Christianity's apex is a set of thrones plus a vacuum — and each arrangement carries its own accountability cost.

WHERE THE ARROWS END



Each arrow points to whoever can remove the office below it. From the table that follows.

OFFICE	WHO SITS IN IT NOW	CHOSEN BY	REMOVABLE BY
Bishop of Rome (1.4 billion Catholics)	Leo XIV (Robert Francis Prevost) was elected in May 2025 after the death of Francis.	A conclave of cardinals chooses him, and every one of them was appointed by a previous pope.	No body on earth can remove him. Canon law contains no removal procedure for a pope.

Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople (the senior bishop of the Eastern Orthodox churches, seated in Istanbul)	Bartholomew I has held the office since 1991.	The Holy Synod of the Phanar (the patriarchate's governing council of bishops) elects him.	In theory a synod can remove him; in modern practice none has.
Archbishop of Canterbury (Anglican Communion)	Sarah Mullally was confirmed in January and installed in March 2026. She is the first woman in the office, and filled the vacancy left when Justin Welby resigned in 2024 over the Smyth safeguarding review.	The Crown Nominations Commission (a Church of England committee of bishops, clergy and lay members) nominates the candidate.	In effect the holder leaves only by resigning, and the resignation that created this vacancy is the record's rare counterexample.
Independent Protestant churches	Nobody sits above the congregation.	—	The vacancy is not freedom: in an independent church, the only court above the pastor may be a board the pastor appointed.

THE TELL

Two failure modes, side by side: thrones nobody can remove, and pulpits nobody above can review. Both are answered by the same question — who can say no to this office, and when did they last do it?

Who holds what

ENTITY	TYPE	HOLDER	HOLDS	WHY IT MATTERS TO YOU	RECEIPT
The independent church with a founder-appointed board	Governance form	The founding or senior pastor holds it.	The pastor controls doctrine, membership, discipline and the budget at once.	It decides whether your family belongs, and who makes that decision.	**PATTERN OBSERVED** · the highest-risk configuration identified across documented collapses
IRS §501(c)(3) (the tax-code section that confers charitable status) with the §6033 church exemption	Statutory privilege	Every U.S. congregation holds it automatically.	It gives full charitable status with no obligation to file the public Form 990 that almost every other charity files.	It decides whether you can see where your giving went.	**OFFICIAL POLICY** · Internal Revenue Code
IRC §107 parsonage allowance (the tax-free housing allowance for clergy)	Statutory privilege	Ordained clergy receive it.	The value of clergy housing is excluded from taxable income.	It is the public subsidy inside your pastor's compensation.	**OFFICIAL POLICY** · Internal Revenue Code §107

Christian broadcasting and publishing conglomerates	Commercial	Corporate boards and author-leaders control them.	They control the distribution of what most believers read and hear about their own faith.	They shape what you are taught, and who makes money from it.	PATTERN OBSERVED
CCLI (Christian Copyright Licensing International) and worship licensing	Commercial	A licensing clearinghouse and megachurch record labels hold it.	They collect royalties every time a congregation sings a catalogued song.	Your Sunday morning becomes another church's revenue line.	PATTERN OBSERVED
Political voter-guide and mobilization operations	Political	Advocacy directors and party operatives run them.	They convert congregational trust into turnout and donor data.	Your vote is harvested through your pew.	PATTERN OBSERVED

Sources for this section: 5 6 7 13

WHY THIS MATTERS TO YOU

Most readers picture "the Church" as one body with one head. For many independent Protestant congregations the real top of the chain is the local pastor and a board, sometimes a board the pastor helped choose.

If your pastor did something seriously wrong, do you know, in writing, who could remove him? Have you ever seen your church's bylaws? You are allowed to ask for them.

08 Law & state here

BEFORE YOU READ

What states actually do. That includes how they fund, protect, regulate or enforce the tradition, and which outside body, if any, can compel an answer from it. For most readers, this is where the institution meets their own passport.

COUNTRY	WHAT THE LAW DOES	THE ACCOUNTABILITY QUESTION
United States	Churches are tax-exempt without applying and file no public Form 990 [1] [2], and clergy housing allowances are tax-free [3].	Churches are the largest group of charities that most Americans cannot look up, though a few smaller groups are excused too [2]; the Supreme Court held in 2026 that bans on conversion talk therapy (counseling that tries to change a person's sexual orientation or gender identity) face strict scrutiny, and sent the case back to the lower courts [4].
England	The Church of England is an established church, and 26 of its bishops sit in the House of Lords by law [17].	The Archbishop of Canterbury resigned in 2024 after a review of the Smyth abuse [6]

Germany	The state collects church tax (Kirchensteuer, a surcharge on registered members' income tax) for the Catholic and Protestant churches: €12.84bn in 2025 [18].	Members leave by making a formal civil declaration.
Vatican City	It is a sovereign state whose head "is judged by no one" [5].	See Catholicism

Who can compel an answer

State charity regulators and attorneys general in the U.S. can compel an answer, as can the Charity Commission for England and Wales and civil safeguarding authorities. Congregational polity (government of each church by its own members) means the civil bodies are usually the only bodies — there is no bishop to appeal to, so the regulator is the appeal.

WHY THIS MATTERS TO YOU

If you are American, here is a fact most churchgoers don't know: churches are excused from filing the public Form 990 that lets anyone look up a charity's income and top salaries. A few other groups are excused too, but churches are the largest.

Your pastor's housing allowance is also tax-free. Nobody is breaking the law here. But the law is the reason you can't look your own church up. Did anyone ever tell you that?

09 Money

BEFORE YOU READ

Where the money comes from, how each flow is justified, how it can be used to control, and who benefits. Read it the way you would read any organization you give to: what is disclosed, what is not, and who decides.

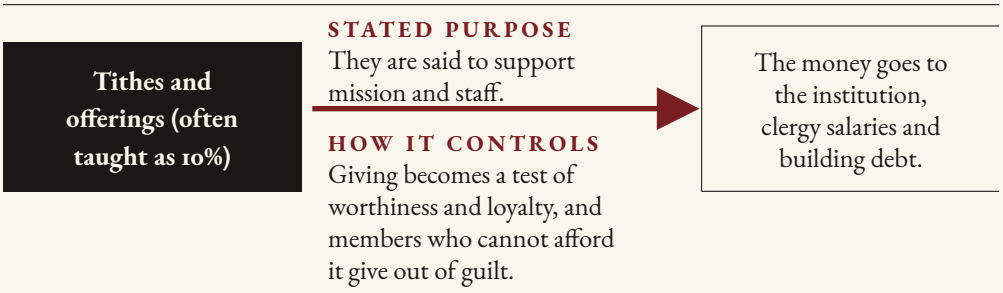
Where it comes from

- The money comes from tithes and offerings (often taught as 10% pre-tax), building campaigns, missions funds, book and media sales, and school tuition.
- In the U.S., churches are automatically tax-exempt and — unlike almost every other US charity — exempt from filing public Form 990 disclosures. **OFFICIAL POLICY** · IRS §501(c)(3), §6033 church exemption
- Clergy housing allowances are excludable from taxable income. **OFFICIAL POLICY** · IRC §107 parsonage allowance
- The structural result is a charitable sector with among the least financial transparency in American law.

Follow the money

FLOW	STATED PURPOSE	HOW IT CONTROLS	WHO BENEFITS
Tithes and offerings (often taught as 10%)	They are said to support mission and staff.	Giving becomes a test of worthiness and loyalty, and members who cannot afford it give out of guilt.	The money goes to the institution, clergy salaries and building debt.
Building campaigns and capital pledges	They are said to fund facilities for ministry.	Multi-year pledges bind members financially to an institution they may want to leave.	The institution and its construction and consulting vendors benefit.
Unpaid volunteer labor	It is framed as service and the use of spiritual gifts.	It works as extraction: the leadership is paid and the workforce is not, and the hours crowd out life outside the church.	The institution and its salaried staff benefit.
Media, books, conferences, worship licensing	They are offered as teaching and resources.	They are sold to a captive audience, and the pastor's personal intellectual property is monetized through the congregation.	Individual leaders, publishers and record labels benefit.

WHERE THE MONEY GOES, AND WHAT IT HOLDS



Building campaigns and capital pledges	**STATED PURPOSE** They are said to fund facilities for ministry.	→	The institution and its construction and consulting vendors benefit.
	HOW IT CONTROLS Multi-year pledges bind members financially to an institution they may want to leave.		
Unpaid volunteer labor	**STATED PURPOSE** It is framed as service and the use of spiritual gifts.	→	The institution and its salaried staff benefit.
	HOW IT CONTROLS It works as extraction: the leadership is paid and the workforce is not, and the hours crowd out life outside the church.		
Media, books, conferences, worship licensing	**STATED PURPOSE** They are offered as teaching and resources.	→	Individual leaders, publishers and record labels benefit.
	HOW IT CONTROLS They are sold to a captive audience, and the pastor's personal intellectual property is monetized through the congregation.		

Not to scale. The table gives one figure, the German church tax of €6.75bn in 2025; the other flows are shown without amounts.

Clergy housing allowances are excludable from taxable income.

Pipelines this tradition shares

TITHE TO RESERVE FUND

Source. The money comes from members' income, and giving it is taught as an obligation.

Path. Congregation → Denominational assessment or central treasury (the later steps are not recorded on this page)

Disclosed. Not recorded on this page.

Hidden. U.S. churches file no public Form 990 [12]; portfolio, compensation and holdings are not recorded on this page.

STATE CHURCH TAX

Source. The tax is levied on registered members' taxable income.

Path. National revenue service → Diocesan or church treasury → Institutional operations

Disclosed. In Germany the churches publish the totals [18].

Hidden. Not recorded on this page: how the money is allocated and what assets the churches hold.

WORSHIP LICENSING

Source. The money comes from congregations that sing copyrighted material.

Path. Licensing clearinghouse → Rights holders (the later steps are not recorded on this page)

Disclosed. Not recorded on this page.

Hidden. Not recorded on this page.

SCHOOL TUITION TO FAMILY LEVERAGE

Source. Parents pay for religious education.

Path. School → Institutional network (the later steps are not recorded on this page)

Disclosed. Not recorded on this page.

Hidden. Not recorded on this page: whether schools attach conduct conditions to enrolment.

AID TO POLICY LEVERAGE

Source. The money comes from donor congregations and public grants.

Path. US donor groups → Local partners → Legal and legislative campaigns abroad [9]

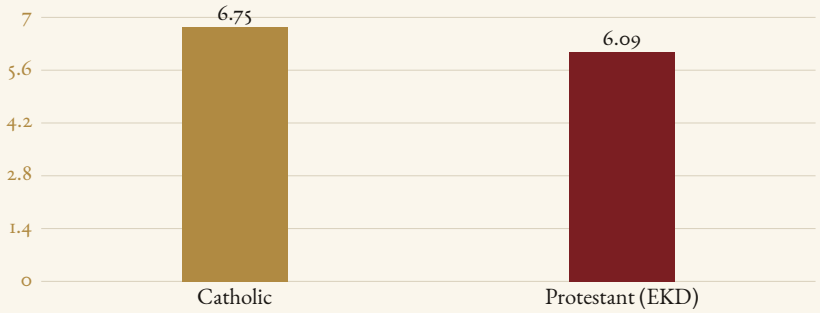
Disclosed. Not recorded on this page. An investigation traced at least $280m from 28 US groups between 2007 and 2018 [9].

Hidden. Not recorded on this page: the conditions attached to the money.

Sources for this section: [1] [2] [3] [9] [18]

Money in numbers

GERMAN CHURCH TAX BY CHURCH, 2025



€ billion — Collected by the state tax offices; a total of €12.84bn. [18]

- **Money abroad:** Between 2007 and 2018, 28 US Christian-right groups spent at least **$280m** outside the US [9].

- **What the US does not publish:** Churches are not required to file a Form 990, so no national total of church income exists [12]. MinistryWatch rates US ministries on donor transparency [10].

WHY THIS MATTERS TO YOU

If you tithe, you may be giving more of your income to your church than to almost anything else except housing and tax. The scorecard finds no public evidence of what leaders are paid. Ask for last year's budget and the senior pastor's total pay, including housing. A church that has nothing to hide can answer that in writing. Watch whether you get an answer, or a sermon about trust.

10 Genealogy

BEFORE YOU READ

Rules with a history. Each card asks the same three questions: what was this rule originally for, has that reason expired, and who benefits from the rule continuing anyway?

HELL AS AN INSTRUMENT OF COMPLIANCE

Origin. Eternal conscious torment took its recognizable shape between the 2nd and 5th centuries, and Augustine's *City of God* (book 21) argues for it at length [33]. ACADEMIC SOURCE

What it was for. On one reading, offered here as interpretation rather than as a finding, an empire governing an enormous, illiterate, unpoliceable population needed a deterrent that worked when no soldier was watching. A god who sees everything and punishes forever is the cheapest police force ever devised.

Why that reason expired. You live under courts, contracts, and cameras. The social function hell was built to perform is now performed by law. What remains is the residue: a threat installed in children before they can evaluate it, doing nothing but making exit feel like suicide.

Who benefits now. Anyone who needs your attendance and your money more than they need your consent benefits. So does the pastor whose salary depends on giving units, and the institution whose retention rate depends on your fear that leaving is fatal.

TITHING AS COVENANT OBLIGATION

Origin. Israelite tithes supported a landless priestly tribe and a physical temple in a mainly agrarian economy without state welfare; Deuteronomy 14:24–26 even lets the tithe be turned into silver and spent at the sanctuary [31]. ACADEMIC SOURCE

What it was for. A specific tribe was barred from owning land, so the community fed them. It was a redistribution mechanism with a defined and auditable beneficiary.

Why that reason expired. There is no Levitical tribe (the priestly tribe of Levi, which the tithe supported), no temple, and no tithe paid in the produce of the land. Modern churches are corporations with salaried executives, and — unlike almost every other American charity — they are exempt from filing the public Form 990 that other nonprofits must file. OFFICIAL POLICY · IRS §6033

Who benefits now. Senior pastors benefit when their compensation is set by boards they appointed. So do denominational headquarters funded by assessments, and publishers and media arms selling into a captive audience. You are asked to fund all of it on faith, and denied the books.

'TOUCH NOT THE LORD'S ANOINTED' — LEADER IMMUNITY

Origin. A phrase from Psalm 105:15, where it protects the patriarchs, and from David's refusal to harm Saul, 'the Lord's anointed' (1 Samuel 24:6), generalized into a rule protecting clergy from criticism [30]. ACADEMIC SOURCE

What it was for. On one reading, offered here as interpretation, it served dynastic stability in an ancient monarchy, where a challenge to the king meant civil war.

Why that reason expired. Your pastor is not a divinely appointed monarch and a complaint about him is not a coup. Every functioning institution on earth has an appeals process. This doctrine exists to ensure yours does not.

Who benefits now. Any leader who would not survive scrutiny benefits. The rule's entire utility is that it converts an accusation into a sin — which means the more serious the accusation, the more effectively it fires.

WIFELY SUBMISSION AND MALE HEADSHIP

Origin. The teaching comes from first-century household codes (the lists of duties for husbands, wives, children and slaves in several New Testament letters), which reflected Greco-Roman patriarchal structure and were later read as timeless command (Colossians 3:18–4:1; Ephesians 5:22–6:9; 1 Peter 2:18–3:7) [32]. ACADEMIC SOURCE

What it was for. On one reading, offered here as interpretation, in a household order where the husband held legal authority over the household, these texts described the existing order and in places softened it.

Why that reason expired. Women now hold property, vote, testify, and leave. Retaining the hierarchy after removing the legal context keeps only the part that harms: a wife with no doctrinal standing to refuse.

Who benefits now. Husbands who want compliance without persuasion benefit, and so do institutions that gain a private enforcement layer — a home in which someone else does the disciplining for free.

Sources for this section: 1 2 30 31 32 33

WHY THIS MATTERS TO YOU

The expired-reason test works on any rule. Take one you follow or enforce, name what it was originally for, and ask whether that reason still exists. If it doesn't, and the rule survives anyway, the section's last question is the one that matters to you: who benefits from it continuing?

11 Reach

BEFORE YOU READ

How far the institution's authority extends into three private areas: what members may read and hear, how children are raised and schooled, and decisions about their own bodies.

Information

- Warnings against 'false teachers,' 'worldly wisdom,' secular psychology, and critical biblical scholarship route members' information through approved teachers. **PATTERN OBSERVED**
- In high-control congregations, former members and critics are pre-labeled bitter, deceived, or spiritually attacked — inoculating the community against their testimony before it is heard. **PATTERN OBSERVED**
- Church-run schools and curricula in some contexts restrict science, history, and sexuality education, narrowing what members can even formulate as a question.

Children

- Infant baptism or infant dedication (a service presenting a baby to God, used where infants are not baptized) attaches identity before any capacity to consent. Confirmation and 'age of accountability' (the age at which a child is held answerable to God) altar calls (invitations to come forward during a service and make a public commitment) arrive during childhood.
- Hell teaching directed at children is the most consequential mechanism in this list: fear of eternal punishment installed before abstract reasoning develops is not a belief a child chose. **PATTERN OBSERVED**
- Youth groups, camps, purity pledges (promises to abstain from sex until marriage), and 'accountability partners' (peers assigned to monitor each other's conduct) create early sexual surveillance; children in some traditions confess to adults who hold community authority over their families.

Bodies

- Complementarian teaching (male headship, wifely submission) is doctrine in large swaths of the tradition; where it governs marriage, it removes a woman's structural standing to refuse. **OFFICIAL POLICY** · denominational statements

- Purity culture (teaching that made sexual abstinence before marriage a central measure of faithfulness) attached shame to female bodies specifically, then offered the institution as the remedy for the shame it created. ACADEMIC SOURCE / FORMER MEMBER TESTIMONY
- LGBTQ members face exclusion from membership, leadership, or marriage in most conservative bodies; conversion therapy practices have been widely documented and are now restricted in many jurisdictions — though in the US the Supreme Court held in 2026 (Chiles v. Salazar) that bans on conversion talk therapy face strict First Amendment scrutiny, and sent the case back to the lower courts [4]. GOVERNMENT REPORT / INVESTIGATIVE REPORT
- Abuse handling: forgiveness pressure, internal 'church discipline' instead of police reporting, and mandatory-reporting failures are documented across denominations. COURT RECORD / GOVERNMENT REPORT

Sources for this section: [4]

WHY THIS MATTERS TO YOU

If you are a parent, this is the section about your children: what they may read, what they are taught about their bodies, and who else has a say in their schooling. Ask what your child would need to do at sixteen to hear the strongest case against what they were taught. Would they be allowed? Would they know it existed?



12

The 30 techniques

How the thirty techniques are established here

1	3	15	11
CODIFIED	DOCUMENTED	TAUGHT	CULTURAL

STAGE 1 Idealize	1 Love Bombing CULTURAL	2 Weaponized Generosity CULTURAL		
STAGE 2 Hook	3 Future Faking TAUGHT	4 Hoovering CULTURAL		
STAGE 3 Devalue	5 Devaluation TAUGHT	6 Gaslighting DOCUMENTED	7 Double Bind TAUGHT	
STAGE 4 Confuse	8 Intermittent Reinforcement TAUGHT	9 Moving the Goalposts TAUGHT	10 Strategic Ambiguity TAUGHT	11 Projection CULTURAL
	12 DARVO CULTURAL	13 Normalization / Desensitization CULTURAL		
STAGE 5 Isolate	14 Isolation TAUGHT	15 Triangulation TAUGHT		

STAGE 6 Extract	16 Flying Monkeys **CULTURAL**	17 Smear Campaign **TAUGHT**	18 Silent Treatment / Stonewalling **DOCUMENTED**	19 Manufactured Consent **TAUGHT**
	20 Trauma Bonding **TAUGHT**	21 Learned Helplessness **TAUGHT**	22 Benevolent Control **TAUGHT**	23 Infantilization **CULTURAL**
	24 Identity Erosion **TAUGHT**	25 Spiritual Bypassing **TAUGHT**	26 Financial Control **CODIFIED**	
STAGE 7 Discard	27 Manufactured Crisis **CULTURAL**	28 Discard **CULTURAL**		
STAGE 8 Replace	29 Replacement **CULTURAL**	30 Plausible Deniability **DOCUMENTED**		

Thirty named techniques from domestic-abuse and social-psychology research, applied to institutions, in the eight stages of the cycle.

BEFORE YOU READ

A fixed checklist of thirty influence and control patterns from research on coercive control and social psychology, applied here to institutions rather than to individual people. Every entry carries an evidence grade. The grade matters more than the name of the technique: Codified or Documented means there is a paper trail; Contested means the claim is disputed.

Thirty named techniques from domestic-abuse and social-psychology research, applied to institutions, in the eight stages of the cycle. Each carries an evidence grade for this tradition.

Stage 1 · Idealize

You arrive with a need and are met with more warmth than you have had in years.

You arrive in crisis and are met with overwhelming warmth. God brought you here. We've been praying for someone like you. You're home now. The emotional intensity arrives weeks or months before the terms do — hell, tithing, submission, authority, the rules about your body.

What it asks of you: Ask yourself when you learned the cost. Was it before or after you already loved these people?

1 · Love Bombing

Overwhelming affection on arrival to create emotional dependency before terms are revealed.

How it shows here

- A visitor walks into church during grief, divorce, addiction recovery, loneliness, or family collapse. Suddenly everyone says, "God brought you here," "We've been praying for someone like you," "You're home now."
- Small groups invite the newcomer to dinner, members text daily, pastors remember their name, and strangers cry with them at the altar.
- The emotional intensity arrives before the doctrine does: hell, tithing, submission, sexual rules, anti-doubt language, authority structures, and "accountability" come later.

The strongest defense. That is just Christian love. The church is supposed to welcome strangers.

The counter. Real love does not need an onboarding pipeline. If the warmth stays unconditional after the person doubts, disagrees, stops attending, refuses baptism, refuses tithing, or leaves, then it was love. If it cools the moment they stop moving toward membership, it was recruitment wearing the face of love.

> EVIDENCE GRADE
>
> CULTURAL No denomination mandates how newcomers are welcomed; intensity is congregational culture, which is why it cannot be attributed upward.

2 · Weaponized Generosity

Giving help that installs unspoken obligation.

How it shows here

- A church helps with rent, groceries, hospital visits, meals after childbirth, addiction recovery, or marriage counseling. Later, when the person questions doctrine or leadership, the response becomes: "After everything this church has done for you, this is how you act?"
- Benevolence ministries (a church's hardship funds for people in need) often come with spiritual framing: "God provided this through the church." That means gratitude is not merely owed to people — it is owed upward, to God, through the institution.
- A struggling member receives emotional support from pastors and small groups, but the support quietly assumes continued attendance, serving, tithing, baptism, confession, or submission to church authority.
- Churches may fund mission trips, youth camps, counseling, childcare, or recovery groups, then use that investment to create loyalty: "This is your family. Don't abandon your family."

The strongest defense. Christians are commanded to feed the hungry, visit the sick, and care for the poor. That is charity, not manipulation.

The counter. Charity does not keep score. If the help remains help even when the recipient disagrees, leaves, stops attending, refuses conversion, refuses tithing, or criticizes leadership, then it is generosity. If the help becomes evidence in a loyalty trial, it was not charity. It was collateral.

EVIDENCE GRADE

CULTURAL Benevolence help is real and widely given; whether it is later cited as a debt of loyalty is congregational practice, and no denomination sets a rule for it.

Stage 2 · Hook

You are given a future that cannot be verified, and a rope for whenever you drift toward the door.

Heaven is promised, with streets of gold, mansions prepared and a reunion with everyone you have buried, and its delivery date falls after you can no longer report back. Then, whenever you drift, retrieval begins: we miss you, the pastor asked about you, the enemy (Satan) attacks the isolated.

What it asks of you: Every reward you were promised is scheduled for after the only moment you could verify it. Notice who set that schedule.

3 · Future Faking

Promising a future that keeps you invested but never has to arrive.

How it shows here

- Heaven is presented as the ultimate deferred reward: no more tears, no more death, reunion with loved ones, streets of gold, mansions prepared, eternal joy in God's presence.
- Suffering now is reframed as investment: endure poverty, grief, abuse, persecution, loneliness, sexual repression, unanswered prayer, and institutional harm because "your reward is in heaven."
- The believer is told that obedience today creates treasure later. Give now. Forgive now. Submit now. Stay faithful now. The payout comes after death, where no living person can audit the transaction.
- Failed earthly promises are often transferred into eternity. The healing did not happen? Heaven will heal it. Justice did not happen? God will judge later. The marriage was miserable? Your suffering will be rewarded. The church failed you? God saw it.

The strongest defense. Christian hope is not manipulation. It gives suffering people meaning and promises ultimate justice.

The counter. Hope becomes future faking when it is used to keep people compliant in present harm. If heaven is used to excuse unanswered abuse, poverty, exploitation, bad leadership, marital misery, or institutional secrecy, then the future reward is not comfort. It is a sedative. A promise that cannot be verified until after death is very convenient for the people collecting obedience before death.

EVIDENCE GRADE

TAUGHT Heaven as the reward for enduring present suffering is taught from the pulpit and in published material; no rule imposes it.

4 · Hoovering

Pulling someone back after they've started to leave, through guilt, love, or fear.

How it shows here

- After you stop attending, the texts begin: "We miss you," "The pastor asked about you," "We haven't seen you in church," "Is everything okay spiritually?" Your absence is treated less like a personal decision and more like a spiritual emergency.
- Friends who rarely checked on your actual pain suddenly become deeply concerned about your "walk with God."
- The group frames distance as danger: "The enemy attacks the isolated," "Don't forsake the gathering," "You're drifting," "This is how people fall away."
- If you left because of abuse, hypocrisy, burnout, or doctrinal doubt, the conversation is redirected away from the reason you left and toward the danger of being away from church.

The strongest defense. Christians are supposed to pursue the lost sheep. Checking on someone who stopped attending is love.

The counter. Care asks, "What happened to you?" Hoovering asks, "How do we get you back?" If the church is more interested in restoring attendance than understanding harm, then the concern is not love. It is retention.

EVIDENCE GRADE

CULTURAL The follow-up texts and calls described here are congregational practice that no body sets; only the phrases used ('don't forsake the gathering', 'the enemy attacks the isolated') are taught from the pulpit.

Stage 3 · Devalue

You are taught that you are broken, that your perception is unreliable, and that both exits from the trap lead back inside.

The bar moves. You tithed, now tithe with joy. You serve, now serve without recognition. You are never quite surrendered enough, and the gap between where you are and where you should be is the engine that keeps you working.

What it asks of you: Notice that you have never once been told you have arrived. Notice that this is not an accident.

5 · Devaluation

Reducing your sense of worth so you become dependent on the institution for identity.

How it shows here

- Christianity often begins by telling the person they are a sinner before God, sometimes this bluntly: "You are a sinner. The heart is deceitful. Without God you are nothing."
- The believer is taught that their natural desires are suspect, their thoughts are unreliable, their body is dangerous, their sexuality is corrupted, and their moral instincts cannot be trusted without God.
- Even ordinary human self-respect can be reframed as pride. Confidence becomes arrogance. Anger becomes rebellion. Boundaries become unforgiveness. Doubt becomes spiritual weakness.
- The person is told they are infinitely loved, but only after being told they deserved judgment. The love lands harder because the self has already been lowered.

The strongest defense. Christianity does not devalue people. It teaches that humans are made in the image of God and loved by God.

The counter. That defense is exactly the hook: exalted in theory, degraded in practice. If the person is told they have divine worth but cannot trust their mind, body, heart, conscience, sexuality, or moral judgment without institutional correction, then "image of God" becomes decorative language over a system of self-erasure.

EVIDENCE GRADE

TAUGHT Human depravity and the unreliability of the heart are taught doctrine across the conservative tradition; enforcement is homiletic (carried out through preaching), not procedural.

6 · Gaslighting

Making you doubt your own experience so you trust the institution's interpretation instead.

How it shows here

- A person says, "This church hurt me," and the answer becomes, "Don't let bitterness take root," "You need to forgive," or "The enemy wants to divide the body."
- A woman says a pastor, husband, or leader abused power, and the response becomes, "Are you sure you're not being rebellious?" "Have you prayed about your attitude?" "You may be under spiritual attack."
- A believer says, "This doctrine seems cruel," and the answer becomes, "God's ways are higher than our ways," "Lean not on your own understanding," or "The heart is deceitful."
- Doubt is not treated as evidence that something may be wrong with the teaching. Doubt is treated as evidence that something is wrong with the doubter.

The strongest defense. Christianity teaches humility because human beings are limited and can misunderstand God.

The counter. Humility is not the same as self-erasure. If every moral alarm is dismissed as pride, every wound is dismissed as bitterness, and every objection is dismissed as lack of faith, then humility has become a tool for disabling conscience.

EVIDENCE GRADE

DOCUMENTED The Guidepost report (section 19) records survivors being told that the convention's structure made a list impossible while one was kept [8], an official account set against what survivors knew. The replies quoted in the bullets (bitterness, spiritual attack, 'lean not on your own understanding') are taught from the pulpit and in counsel; no written rule directs them. *(sourced)*

7 · Double Bind

A trap where both options lead to compliance. No exit serves you.

How it shows here

- Members are told to 'test everything against Scripture' — but arriving at a different conclusion than the pastor proves they tested it wrongly, pridefully, or under demonic influence.
- Christians are commanded to confess sin honestly, yet honest confession of doubt, desire, or disagreement is treated as rebellion. Hide it and you are a liar; reveal it and you are a problem.
- Survivors of church abuse are told to 'seek reconciliation' — but pursuing justice is called unforgiveness, and staying silent is later called consent.

The strongest defense. Christianity holds truths in tension — grace and obedience, faith and works. Tension is not a trap.

The counter. Theological paradox is held by the believer freely. A double bind is enforced by an authority against the believer. The test is simple: is there any faithful way to disagree and remain in good standing? If every road leads to guilt, the tension is a cage, not a mystery.

EVIDENCE GRADE

TAUGHT Both halves of the bind are taught: test everything against Scripture and confess honestly, while disagreement and doubt are named pride or rebellion. How the two are combined is pastoral practice.

Stage 4 · Confuse

The rewards become unpredictable, the standard keeps moving, the answers stop meaning anything, and the accusation gets turned around.

You raise a concern and become the problem. You are called divisive, bitter, prideful, under attack, in unresolved sin. Your discernment is reclassified as a spiritual defect. The subject changes from what they did to what is wrong with you for noticing.

What it asks of you: When you last raised something real, did anyone answer the substance? Or did the conversation become about your heart?

8 · Intermittent Reinforcement

Unpredictable reward that creates addictive emotional dependency.

How it shows here

- Worship is engineered for peaks — some Sundays you leave certain God spoke to you; others you feel nothing, and the dryness is framed as your hidden sin or drifting heart, sending you back next week chasing the return.
- The pastor's attention lands warmly and randomly: a hallway word, a public commendation — then months of being unseen. Members orbit the platform (the stage from which services are led), working out what earned the light.
- Answered prayer is God's faithfulness; unanswered prayer is timing, testing, or your unconfessed sin. Every outcome feeds continued play; no outcome ever counts against the machine.

The strongest defense. Spiritual seasons are real; God is not a vending machine, and dry seasons mature faith.

The counter. Seasons are real. The manipulation is the scoreboard: when every consolation is credited to the system and every desolation is billed to you, the season has been converted into a schedule of reinforcement — and the drought is doing the marketing.

> EVIDENCE GRADE
>
> TAUGHT The readings of spiritual highs and dry seasons, and of answered and unanswered prayer, are taught from the pulpit; no governing document sets them out.

9 · Moving the Goalposts

The standard of success keeps shifting so you can never arrive.

How it shows here

- You are told, "Just accept Jesus." Then acceptance becomes baptism, church membership, tithing, serving, submission to leaders, small group attendance, evangelism, purity, correct doctrine, and never "backsliding" (falling away from faith).
- You ask a theological question. First they say, "Read the Bible." You do. Then they say, "You need the Spirit." You pray. Then they say, "You need humility." You soften. Then they say, "The fact that you still struggle shows rebellion."
- Abuse survivors are told to forgive. When they forgive, they are told to reconcile. When they refuse reconciliation, they are told their forgiveness was not real.

The strongest defense. Christian discipleship is growth. Faith naturally deepens over time.

The counter. Growth is not the problem. The problem is approval that never arrives. If every completed act of obedience only reveals another hidden test, then discipleship has become a treadmill.

> EVIDENCE GRADE
>
> TAUGHT The rising list of expectations (baptism, membership, tithing, serving, forgiveness and then reconciliation) is taught in preaching and discipleship; no document fixes when the standard has been met.

10 · Strategic Ambiguity

Language that sounds profound but means nothing specific — functioning as a shutdown to real questions.

How it shows here

- "God's will" is kept vague enough to justify almost anything: staying in a bad marriage, leaving a job, giving money, forgiving abuse, joining ministry, or remaining silent.
- Churches say salvation is by grace, but also warn that lack of fruit (visible evidence of a changed life) may prove you were never saved.
- Leaders say submission does not mean abuse, but when abuse is reported, victims are told to submit, forgive, reconcile, or avoid division.

The strongest defense. Spiritual life contains mystery; not everything can be reduced to rigid formulas.

The counter. Mystery becomes strategic ambiguity when leaders get clarity for your obligations and mystery for their accountability. If rules are clear only when applied downward, vagueness is serving power.

> EVIDENCE GRADE
>
> TAUGHT The open uses of 'God's will', and the warning that a lack of fruit may show a person was never saved, are taught from the pulpit; no governing document defines them.

11 · Projection

Accusing the outside world of the exact thing the institution practices.

How it shows here

- Churches accuse wounded members of being "divisive" after leadership created division through abuse, favoritism, secrecy, or authoritarian control.
- A survivor names pastoral manipulation, and the church says they are bitter, while the institution refuses repentance.
- Leaders warn against pride while demanding obedience, loyalty, money, unpaid labor, emotional exposure, and silence.
- A church teaches fear of hell, demons, spiritual warfare, and end-times panic, then accuses doubters of being fear-driven.

The strongest defense. Churches have to protect unity and warn against rebellion.

The counter. Unity is not silence. If the institution wounds people and then calls the bleeding person divisive for showing the wound, it is projecting its own violence onto the victim.

> EVIDENCE GRADE
>
> CULTURAL Accusing critics and wounded members of the division, pride and fear the institution itself produces is observed practice, not policy, and cannot be attributed to any single body.

12 · DARVO

Deny the wrongdoing. Attack the person who raised it. Reverse victim and offender.

How it shows here

- A survivor reports pastoral abuse, coercive counseling, sexual misconduct, financial exploitation, or spiritual control. The church first says, "That is not what happened," then says the survivor is bitter, unforgiving, or under attack from the enemy.
- A member exposes hypocrisy or corruption. Leadership responds, "You are causing division in the body of Christ," shifting the focus from the misconduct to the supposed sin of exposing it.
- If a pastor abuses authority, the congregation may be told to pray for the pastor's "persecution," while the victim is pressured to stay silent for the sake of the church's witness.
- The person who was harmed is accused of damaging the ministry, as though the public knowledge of abuse is worse than the abuse itself.

The strongest defense. Churches must protect against false accusations and preserve unity.

The counter. Protecting against false accusations does not require attacking the wounded. If the institution's first instinct is to defend its reputation, question the victim's motives, and frame exposure as division, then unity has become a shield for rot.

> EVIDENCE GRADE
>
> CULTURAL Recasting a report of abuse as bitterness, division or an attack by the enemy is congregational practice that no governing document directs; only the phrases used are preached.

13 · Normalization / Desensitization

Practices that would seem extreme to an outsider feel normal to insiders because they were installed before critical evaluation developed.

How it shows here

- A believer is slowly trained to accept weekly self-denigration: "I am broken," "I am sinful," "I am nothing without God," "my heart is deceitful." At first it wounds; later it sounds like worship.
- Public confession, altar calls, crying in front of strangers, and exposing private pain to pastors or small groups becomes normal because everyone else is doing it.
- Hell language, spiritual warfare, demons, purity shame, and warnings about "the world" become background noise. The believer stops noticing how much fear is required to keep faith stable.
- Church members become desensitized to unpaid labor: childcare, worship team, setup, teardown, small groups, youth ministry, prayer teams, outreach. Exhaustion becomes "serving the Lord."

The strongest defense. Christian practices like confession, service, repentance, and spiritual vigilance are normal parts of discipleship.

The counter. Repetition does not make something healthy. If the community has to train people to ignore shame, fear, exhaustion, or boundary collapse, then discipleship has become desensitization with Bible verses.

EVIDENCE GRADE

CULTURAL Training adult believers to treat self-denigration, public confession, fear language and unpaid labor as normal is congregational practice that no body sets. The teaching of hell to children is covered under technique 20 and section 11.

Stage 5 · Isolate

Your world narrows until every voice you hear is inside the system, and everything you came for now runs through a middleman.

Your friends are here. Your childcare is here. Your kids' school, your small group, possibly your job. Outside sources are reframed as spiritually dangerous — secular therapy, critical scholarship, former members. The community becomes the only place your questions can go, and it is the interested party.

What it asks of you: Count how many of your relationships would survive your leaving. That number is the actual price on the ticket.

14 · Isolation

Shrinking your world until the only voices you hear are inside the system.

How it shows here

- Christianity can isolate through warnings against "the world," "bad company," "unequally yoked" relationships (a believer bound, above all in marriage, to a non-believer), secular media, non-Christian dating, non-Christian therapy, and friendships that "pull you away from God."
- A believer who starts questioning may be told to stop watching certain videos, stop reading critics, stop spending time with ex-Christians, and instead return to Scripture, prayer, church, and pastoral counsel.
- The church may frame isolation as protection: secular friends are tempting you, doubters are infecting you, culture is deceiving you, and Satan is using outsiders to separate you from the body of Christ.
- Even family can be re-ranked. Biological family becomes secondary to "church family," especially if relatives question the church's influence.

The strongest defense. Christians are supposed to be careful about influences that lead them away from God.

The counter. Discernment becomes isolation when the institution gets to define every threatening influence as spiritually dangerous. If the only "safe" voices are the ones that lead you back to the church, then the issue is not holiness. It is information control.

EVIDENCE GRADE

TAUGHT Separation from the world is scriptural teaching applied at congregational discretion, with no denominational rule requiring it.

15 · Triangulation

Inserting intermediaries between you and the thing you came for, so the institution is always in the middle.

How it shows here

- A church triangulates through "mature believers." If you question leadership, you are sent to an elder, mentor, small-group leader, pastor's wife, accountability partner, or "older Christian" who all repeat the same conclusion: submit, forgive, stay, trust God.
- Family is used as a spiritual weapon: "Think about what this will do to your children," "Your spouse needs a godly partner," "Your parents are praying for you to come back."
- The church compares you to better believers: "Look at Sarah — she went through worse and stayed faithful," "Look at Job," "Look at Jesus suffering silently."
- It triangulates with Satan: your doubts are not your own; they are "the enemy trying to isolate you."
- It triangulates with the lost: if you speak publicly about harm, you are told you may cause unbelievers to reject Christ.

The strongest defense. Christianity is communal. Believers are supposed to seek counsel, accountability, and encouragement from others.

The counter. Counsel becomes triangulation when every "independent" voice is institutionally pre-loaded to return you to obedience. If every elder, mentor, spouse, friend, and Bible verse points back to the same authority structure, then you are not receiving counsel. You are being surrounded.

EVIDENCE GRADE

TAUGHT Sending a questioner to elders, mentors and family who repeat the same counsel is taught as seeking godly counsel and carried out at congregational discretion; no denominational rule requires it.

Stage 6 · Extract

Now the harvest: your labor, your money, your identity, your silence, your children's schooling, your capacity to trust yourself.

It starts with ten percent, then offerings, then the building fund, then the mission fund. Volunteer hours add up to a second job. Your mother phones about your soul because someone at church mentioned you. Your identity dissolves into prayer warrior, man of God, Proverbs 31 woman (the ideal wife of Proverbs 31). Ask where the money goes and you hear "trust the leadership".

What it asks of you: Add up what you have given in money and unpaid hours over ten years. Then ask what document you were ever shown in return.

16 · Flying Monkeys

The community enforces the institution's norms without being asked — mobilized by culture, not memos.

How it shows here

- A pastor does not confront the critic directly. Instead, small-group leaders, prayer partners, elders, women's ministry leaders, youth volunteers, and "concerned friends" start texting: "We miss you," "Are you okay spiritually?" "Please don't let bitterness win."
- A survivor reports church abuse, and suddenly multiple church members approach them separately with the same message: forgive, stop gossiping, protect unity, do not hurt the witness of Christ.
- A spouse, parent, or friend is recruited through prayer language: "We need to pray them back," which sounds loving but functions as coordinated pressure.
- The person who left is watched: who they date, what they post, whether they drink, whether they attend another church, whether they criticize the old one.

The strongest defense. Christians are supposed to pursue wandering sheep and care for people spiritually.

The counter. Care listens before it corrects. FLYING MONKEYS arrive with a conclusion already installed: return, repent, stop talking, forgive leadership. If the people "checking in" are really delivering the institution's message, they are not shepherds. They are messengers with soft voices.

EVIDENCE GRADE

CULTURAL Members pressing a critic or survivor to return, forgive and stop talking is congregational practice with no written rule; only the idea of pursuing the wandering sheep is taught.

17 · Smear Campaign

Rewriting your character after departure to protect the institution from the implications of your leaving.

How it shows here

- A church labels a critic bitter, divisive, rebellious, offended, spiritually immature, or under demonic attack.
- Survivors of pastoral abuse may be accused of gossip, slander, unforgiveness, or trying to destroy the church.
- A person who leaves may be explained as someone who "walked away from God," "wanted sin," or "couldn't submit to authority."
- Leaders may privately brief influential members before the survivor speaks publicly, shaping the narrative in advance.

The strongest defense. Churches must protect the body from slander and division.

The counter. Protecting unity does not require assassinating the character of the wounded. If the church's first response to harm is to explain why the victim cannot be trusted, the institution is not defending truth. It is defending itself.

EVIDENCE GRADE

TAUGHT The labels applied to critics and survivors (bitter, divisive, rebellious, under attack) are taught from the pulpit and repeated in congregations; no written rule directs their use.

18 · Silent Treatment / Stonewalling

Refusing to engage with legitimate questions in order to maintain control.

How it shows here

- A member reports abuse, manipulation, financial secrecy, or pastoral misconduct. Leaders say they are "looking into it," then weeks or months pass with no meaningful update.
- A survivor asks for accountability and is told to forgive, pray, wait, avoid gossip, and trust church leadership.
- Questions about doctrine, money, sexual misconduct, or leadership authority are redirected into private meetings where nothing is documented.
- The person who keeps asking becomes the problem: "Why can't you let this go?" "You're stirring division."

The strongest defense. Churches need confidentiality, patience, and due process.

The counter. Confidentiality protects victims. Stonewalling protects institutions. If "process" produces silence for the harmed and protection for the powerful, it is not due process. It is delay dressed as wisdom.

EVIDENCE GRADE

DOCUMENTED The Makin Review (section 19) records the Church of England failing to act on abuse by John Smyth for decades [6]. The same silence in congregations, with complaints met by 'looking into it', is practice that no document records. *(sourced)*

19 · Manufactured Consent

Creating the appearance of choice when the conditions of choice were shaped before you could evaluate them.

How it shows here

- A teenager “chooses” baptism after years of hell teaching, altar calls, youth-camp emotion, family expectation, and fear of being unsaved.
- Members “volunteer” for unpaid labor after sermons about sacrifice, spiritual gifts, servant leadership, and not burying your talent.
- A survivor “forgives” publicly because the church frames refusal as bitterness, division, or disobedience.
- A woman “submits” in marriage after being taught that male headship is God’s order and resistance dishonors God.

The strongest defense. Christian faith requires personal decision; people freely choose baptism, service, forgiveness, and discipleship.

The counter. A choice made under fear of hell, social loss, spiritual shame, or family disappointment is not clean consent. If the only acceptable yes is public and the no is treated as rebellion, the institution has manufactured agreement.

EVIDENCE GRADE

TAUGHT The teaching that shapes these choices (hell, sacrifice, male headship, forgiveness) is preached and published; the choices it produces are then presented as free.

20 · Trauma Bonding

The wound and the bandage come from the same hand.

How it shows here

- The church teaches that you are sinful, broken, depraved, or lost — then gives you worship, forgiveness, hugs, altar prayer, community, and "the peace of God."
- Hell terror and salvation comfort come from the same pulpit. The institution creates the fear, then becomes the rescue.
- A member is shamed for doubt, sexuality, anger, or boundaries — then restored through prayer, confession, pastoral approval, or public recommitment.
- Abuse survivors may be pressured to forgive the very community that failed them, then praised for being "Christlike" when they return.

The strongest defense. Christianity offers grace to people who are genuinely suffering from sin and shame.

The counter. Grace becomes TRAUMA BONDING when the institution manufactures the shame it then relieves. If the same system wounds your conscience and then sells itself as the only place you can be clean again, the comfort is part of the chain.

EVIDENCE GRADE

TAUGHT Hell is taught to children alongside divine love, in curricula and from the platform, across most of the conservative tradition.

21 · Learned Helplessness

Teaching you that your own judgment is unreliable until you stop trusting it entirely.

How it shows here

- A member asks hard questions and is told to pray, read Scripture, submit, wait, forgive, and stop doubting. None of it resolves the issue.
- Abuse survivors report harm and are told to forgive, reconcile, avoid gossip, and trust leadership.
- A person tries to be pure, humble, faithful, and obedient, but still feels condemned.
- Eventually they stop trusting action and only wait for God, pastors, or the church to decide what happens.

The strongest defense. Christianity teaches surrender to God, not helplessness.

The counter. Surrender becomes LEARNED HELPLESSNESS when every human action is labeled pride unless it aligns with leadership. If prayer replaces protection and forgiveness replaces accountability, helplessness has been spiritualized.

EVIDENCE GRADE

TAUGHT The counsel to pray, wait, forgive and trust leadership in place of acting is taught from the pulpit and in pastoral counsel; no written rule requires it.

22 · Benevolent Control

Control wrapped in the language of care, so that resisting the control feels like rejecting the love.

How it shows here

- Church leaders tell members not to date unbelievers, read certain books, attend certain events, or listen to critics because they are "guarding their hearts."
- Pastors frame surveillance as shepherding: checking attendance, asking about sexual behavior, tracking giving, assigning accountability partners, or questioning friendships.
- Women are told male headship is loving protection. Children are told obedience is safety. Doubters are told pastoral oversight protects them from deception.
- Abuse survivors are encouraged to forgive and reconcile "for their healing," even when reconciliation benefits the abuser or the church's image more than the survivor.

The strongest defense. Christian leaders are called to shepherd, protect, and guide people spiritually.

The counter. Shepherding becomes BENEVOLENT CONTROL when protection removes agency. If care always leads back to obedience, silence, purity, submission, or institutional loyalty, then the shepherd's staff is also a hook.

> EVIDENCE GRADE
>
> TAUGHT Male headship and wifely submission are taught as doctrine in denominational statements; enforcement is congregational.

23 · Infantilization

Positioning the adult believer as permanently childlike and dependent on institutional authority.

How it shows here

- Adult believers are called sheep who need shepherds, children who need spiritual fathers, or immature Christians who must submit to elders.
- Members are told not to trust their hearts, desires, doubts, or understanding.
- Women may be treated as needing male covering (spiritual protection and authority held by a husband or male leader), protection, or leadership.
- Young adults are monitored in dating, sexuality, friendships, money, church attendance, and doctrine as though adulthood does not exist outside pastoral approval.

The strongest defense. Christianity uses family and shepherd imagery to describe loving spiritual care.

The counter. Imagery becomes INFANTILIZATION when it justifies permanent dependency. If adults cannot disagree, leave, date, read, question, or set boundaries without being called immature, the church has confused discipleship with childhood.

> EVIDENCE GRADE
>
> CULTURAL Shepherd-and-flock vocabulary is scriptural; whether it maps onto actual governance varies entirely by congregation.

24 · Identity Erosion

Gradually replacing your identity with a role the institution provides, until you can't separate who you are from where you belong.

How it shows here

- The believer's identity is replaced with religious categories: sinner, saved, servant, disciple, sheep, witness, warrior, bride of Christ, child of God.
- Personal desire becomes suspicious. Wanting something outside church expectations is called selfishness, flesh, worldliness, rebellion, or lack of surrender.
- A person's politics, sexuality, gender role, marriage, parenting, friendships, entertainment, and emotional life are slowly filtered through "biblical worldview."
- Anger at harm is renamed bitterness. Boundaries are renamed unforgiveness. Doubt is renamed pride.
- The person no longer asks, "What do I believe?" They ask, "What am I allowed to believe and still be faithful?"

The strongest defense. Christianity gives people a new identity in Christ.

The counter. A new identity becomes IDENTITY EROSION when it requires the death of self-trust. If "in Christ" means your anger, body, conscience, grief, sexuality, curiosity, and boundaries must be supervised by the church, then the old self was not redeemed. It was replaced.

> EVIDENCE GRADE
>
> TAUGHT The replacement identities (sinner, servant, disciple, the 'biblical worldview') are taught in preaching and discipleship material; no rule imposes them.

25 · Spiritual Bypassing

Using spiritual language to avoid engaging with real pain, real questions, and real accountability.

How it shows here

- Abuse is bypassed with "forgive seventy times seven," "God will use it for good," "vengeance is the Lord's," or "don't let bitterness take root."
- Grief is bypassed with "they're in a better place."
- Anger is bypassed as sin, rebellion, or unforgiveness.
- Trauma is turned into testimony before the person has had safety, therapy, rage, or repair.
- Institutional harm is minimized as "church hurt," then redirected toward trusting God again.

The strongest defense. Christian forgiveness and hope help people heal.

The counter. Forgiveness becomes SPIRITUAL BYPASSING when it arrives before truth, safety, accountability, and anger. If the victim must become Christlike before the offender becomes honest, spirituality is protecting the wrong person.

> EVIDENCE GRADE
>
> TAUGHT The phrases used to meet harm with forgiveness and hope ('forgive seventy times seven', 'God will use it for good') are taught from the pulpit and in counsel; no written rule directs their use.

26 · Financial Control

Extracting money through spiritual obligation while offering no transparency about where it goes.

How it shows here

- Churches may pressure members to tithe, give offerings, support missions, fund building campaigns, sponsor pastors, pay for conferences, and volunteer endless unpaid labor.
- Prosperity-oriented churches may teach that giving money unlocks blessing, harvest, breakthrough, healing, debt cancellation, or divine favor.
- A struggling member may receive benevolence help, then later feel unable to question leadership because the church “was there for them.”

- Volunteers may be financially exploited through unpaid labor framed as ministry: childcare, worship, cleaning, youth work, tech, setup, meals, outreach.

The strongest defense. Christians are commanded to give generously and support the work of the church.

The counter. Generosity becomes FINANCIAL CONTROL when refusal is treated as spiritual failure. If giving is voluntary, people must be free to say no without guilt, loss of status, leadership suspicion, or sermons aimed at their wallet.

> EVIDENCE GRADE
>
> **CODIFIED** The no-transparency half is codified: 26 U.S.C. §6033 [2] excuses churches from filing the Form 990 that almost every other charity files. The extraction half (tithe pressure, prosperity teaching, unpaid labor) is taught and cultural, not codified. *(sourced)*

Stage 7 · Discard

You become expensive — too many questions, too much independence — and the urgency ramps up until you are removed.

When you become inconvenient — a whistleblower, a departing staff member, a member who asked about the budget — the warmth ends and the narrative starts. Prayer requests carry information. Pulpit references need no names.

What it asks of you: You have watched this happen to someone else. You may have half-believed the story you were told about them. Ask yourself who told it.

27 · Manufactured Crisis

Creating urgency to suppress critical thinking and generate loyalty.

How it shows here

- Churches may manufacture crisis through hell, demons, spiritual warfare, end-times prophecy, persecution narratives, culture-war panic, and warnings that children are being stolen by the world.

- A member's doubt becomes a spiritual emergency: "The enemy is attacking you," "You are drifting," "This is life or death."
- Abuse exposure becomes a crisis for church unity rather than a crisis for the victim's safety.
- Political fear may be used to demand loyalty: vote correctly, give urgently, protect the nation, defend biblical values.

The strongest defense. Christianity takes spiritual danger seriously; evil and deception are real.

The counter. Spiritual danger becomes MANUFACTURED CRISIS when fear is used to rush obedience. If every disagreement becomes demonic attack and every critique becomes persecution, the church has turned anxiety into governance.

> EVIDENCE GRADE
>
> CULTURAL Crisis framing (spiritual warfare, end-times prophecy, persecution and culture-war panic) is preached and repeated in congregational culture; no governing body sets it.

28 · Discard

Removing members who become too costly — too many questions, too much independence, too visible a contradiction.

How it shows here

- A church that once called someone "family" quietly stops inviting them after they question abuse, money, doctrine, or leadership.

- A volunteer who gave years of unpaid labor is removed from ministry after raising concerns.
- A survivor is tolerated while quiet, but discarded once they name names.
- Former members are no longer prayed with as beloved people but prayed about as warnings.
- The person's value shifts from "gifted servant" to "divisive threat."

The strongest defense. Churches sometimes have to remove divisive or unrepentant people for the health of the body.

The counter. Discipline becomes DISCARD when the institution removes the person who exposed harm instead of the harm itself. If the church only calls someone dangerous after they become inconvenient, the problem was never their soul. It was their refusal to stay useful.

> EVIDENCE GRADE
>
> CULTURAL Departure is handled by congregations individually; the same act produces expulsion in one church and nothing in another.

Stage 8 · Replace

Your seat is filled before the door shuts, and nobody is responsible for any of it because the authority was attributed to God.

A new family sits in your row within a month, and a new volunteer joins your team. And nobody is responsible for any of it, because every rule was God's, and God does not appear at members' meetings.

What it asks of you: They will tell you the rules are not theirs. Ask who wrote the employment contracts, then, and who signs the cheques.

29 · Replacement

Your seat is filled before the door closes behind you.

How it shows here

- A volunteer leaves after burnout; the church immediately recruits someone else and calls it "God providing."
- A survivor is pushed out, and a newer, more enthusiastic member is elevated as proof the ministry is healthy.
- A pastor replaces dissenting elders or leaders with loyal ones.

- Your testimony, labor, music, childcare, tithes, and small-group role are reassigned before your pain is addressed.

The strongest defense. Ministry must continue even when people leave.

The counter. Continuity becomes REPLACEMENT when the institution fills your role faster than it repairs your wound. If the machine keeps running by installing another body where yours collapsed, the ministry has revealed what it valued.

> EVIDENCE GRADE
>
> CULTURAL Filling a departed member's roles quickly is congregational practice; no written rule directs it.

30 · Plausible Deniability

The institution is never responsible, because the authority is attributed to God — who isn't available for cross-examination.

How it shows here

- A pastor never explicitly says, "Shun her," but preaches about wolves, divisive people, bitterness, rebellion, gossip, and protecting the flock. The congregation understands who he means.
- A church does not officially force unpaid labor, but sermons about sacrifice, spiritual gifts, and "not being a consumer" make exhausted members feel sinful for saying no.

- Abuse survivors are not formally silenced. They are simply told to follow Matthew 18 (the passage that sets out steps for confronting a fellow believer privately before involving the church), avoid gossip, forgive, protect unity, and trust leadership. The institution can later say, "We never told them not to speak."
- A woman is not openly commanded to stay in abuse. She is told to honor marriage, submit, forgive, pray, seek counsel, avoid bitterness, and trust God. The pressure is theological, but the church can deny coercion.
- A queer person is told they are loved, welcome, and made in God's image — while every pathway to actual belonging requires celibacy, silence, repentance, or identity suppression.

The strongest defense. The Bible teaches forgiveness, unity, service, and accountability. No one is forced to stay in a church. Bad leaders misuse Christianity; that is not the faith itself.

The counter. Forgiveness becomes PLAUSIBLE DENIABILITY when it is preached generally but applied strategically to silence victims. "No one forced you" is hollow when leaving means losing friends, family approval, ministry identity, and spiritual safety. If the institution repeatedly produces the same harms while calling each one a local misuse, then "bad leaders" are not an exception. They are the expendable layer protecting the system.

> EVIDENCE GRADE
>
> **DOCUMENTED** The Guidepost report (section 19) records Southern Baptist executive staff telling survivors that the convention's structure made a list of accused ministers impossible while keeping one [8]. The informal pressure described in the other bullets is deniable by design and is cultural, recorded in no document. *(sourced)*

Sources for this section: [1] [2]

WHY THIS MATTERS TO YOU

Count grades, not names. A long list of Contested entries says something very different from a short list of Codified ones. A bias to watch for in yourself: people rate the same pressure as "normal" when their own group applies it and as "manipulation" when another group does. Before you judge an entry, try imagining it applied by a group you distrust. Does it look different?

13

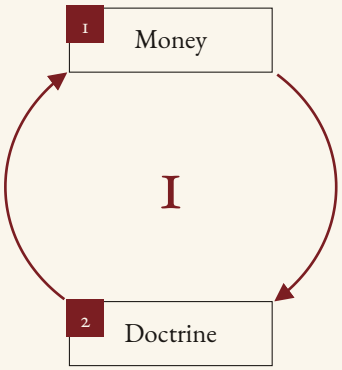
The loops

BEFORE YOU READ

How the techniques connect into cycles. A single practice can look harmless on its own. The loops show how one step feeds the next, so that, for example, a newcomer's welcome turns into an obligation.

> The seven loops below show how the practices connect, so that each step makes the next one easier and the last step feeds the first. The loops are analysis built from findings recorded elsewhere on this page PATTERN OBSERVED; each step names the section or technique where its fact is recorded.

1 · Money to Doctrine to Money



Tithing is taught as a covenant obligation, the office that receives it interprets it, and the money pays the salaries of those who go on teaching it.

How it runs.

1. Tithing is taught as a covenant obligation, often as 10% of pre-tax income (sections 1 and 10).
2. The obligation is preached by the pastor whose salary it funds; in the composite day, the pastor preached on Malachi's "will a man rob God" (sections 2 and 10).
3. Giving becomes a test of worthiness and loyalty, and attendance and giving are tracked (sections 9 and 14).

4. The money pays clergy salaries, building debt and denominational assessments, and in the United States churches are not required to file a public Form 990 (sections 7 and 9).

5. Senior pastors whose pay is set by boards they appointed go on teaching the obligation (sections 10 and 16).

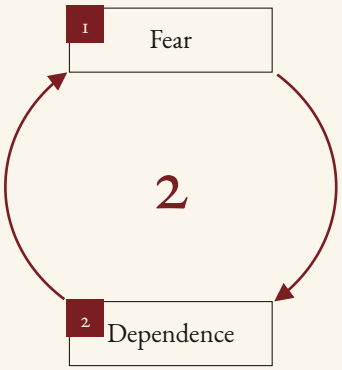
Techniques that feed it. 26 · Financial Control, 2 · Weaponized Generosity, 3 · Future Faking, 10 · Strategic Ambiguity.

Why it closes. The office that teaches the obligation also receives the money and, in the independent church, sets its own pay through a board it appointed. No public return shows where the money went, so the giver funds it on faith and is denied the books (section 10).

Where it could be broken, and by whom. It weakens wherever accounts are published. Section 20 names voluntary, audited, member-facing accounts by the major U.S. denominations as the change that would revise this page's financial findings, and section 5 records that the Form 990 exemption is a statute that can be amended. A member can ask for the budget and the senior pastor's total pay before giving. This paragraph is analysis, not a documented finding.

An example from this page. In section 2, Dana's tithe envelope holds two hundred and forty dollars, "which is ten percent, which is also the car insurance".

2 · Fear to Dependence to Fear



Hell is taught to children, relief comes from the same pulpit, and parents formed this way pass the teaching on to their own children.

How it runs.

1. Hell teaching reaches children before abstract reasoning develops, through curricula, altar calls and camps (section 11; technique 20).
2. The believer is taught that the heart is deceitful, and doubt is treated as evidence that something is wrong with the doubter (techniques 5 and 6).
3. Relief comes from the same pulpit: worship, forgiveness, altar prayer and community (technique 20).
4. Dry seasons and unanswered prayer are billed to the believer's hidden sin, which sends them back the next week (technique 8).
5. Parents formed this way answer their own children's questions the same way (section 2).

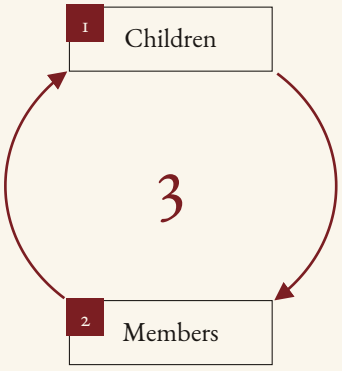
Techniques that feed it. 20 · Trauma Bonding, 5 · Devaluation, 8 · Intermittent Reinforcement, 27 · Manufactured Crisis, 13 · Normalization / Desensitization.

Why it closes. The fear and the relief come from the same source, so each relief renews the need for the next. Section 10 records hell as a threat "installed in children before they can evaluate it", and a threat learned that early does not need the institution to repeat it.

Where it could be broken, and by whom. It weakens where a child meets the teaching only when able to weigh it, and where a parent answers a child's question without the threat. That lies with parents, and with the churches that write children's curricula. This paragraph is analysis, not a documented finding.

An example from this page. In section 2, Dana's eleven-year-old daughter asks whether her grandfather is in hell and understands from the answer "that the answer is yes and that asking again is not permitted".

3 · Children to Members to Children



Baptism, youth programmes and church schools shape adults who then give, volunteer and bring their own children to the same rites.

How it runs.

1. Infant baptism or infant dedication attaches identity before any capacity to consent (section 11).
2. Youth groups, camps, purity pledges and accountability partners shape how a child sees their body and their doubts (section 11).
3. Church-run schools and curricula in some contexts narrow science, history and sexuality education, and the tuition parents pay can carry conduct conditions (sections 9 and 11).
4. A teenager "chooses" baptism after years of hell teaching, altar calls and family expectation (technique 19).
5. As adults they give and volunteer, and bring their own children for baptism or dedication (sections 9 and 11).

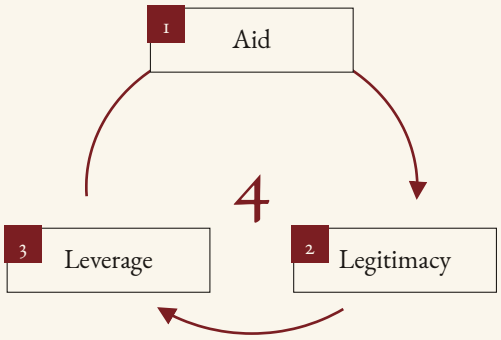
Techniques that feed it. 19 · Manufactured Consent, 13 · Normalization / Desensitization, 20 · Trauma Bonding, 24 · Identity Erosion.

Why it closes. Each generation is enrolled before it can consent and formed before it can compare, and then it funds the formation of the next. The loop does not need anyone to decide to continue it.

Where it could be broken, and by whom. It weakens where commitment waits until a young person can weigh it, and where a young person can hear the strongest case against what they were taught. That choice sits with parents, and with the schools and youth programmes that set the terms. This paragraph is analysis, not a documented finding.

An example from this page. Technique 19 describes a teenager who "chooses" baptism after years of hell teaching, altar calls, youth-camp emotion and family expectation.

4 · Aid to Legitimacy to Leverage to Aid



Faith-based aid and development organizations buy public standing, standing sustains the disclosure exemption, and the exemption raises the revenue.

How it runs.

1. Faith-based aid and development organizations hold major humanitarian contracts, and the relief work is real (section 16).
2. That work earns public standing, and the public funds the tax exemption (section 16).
3. The exemption gives churches full charitable status without the public Form 990 almost every other charity files (sections 7 and 9).
4. Money raised without disclosure funds campaigns abroad: 28 US Christian-right groups spent at least $280m outside the US between 2007 and 2018 (sections 9 and 16).
5. In some contexts aid arrives inside a religious framework that recipients cannot refuse without losing the service (section 16).

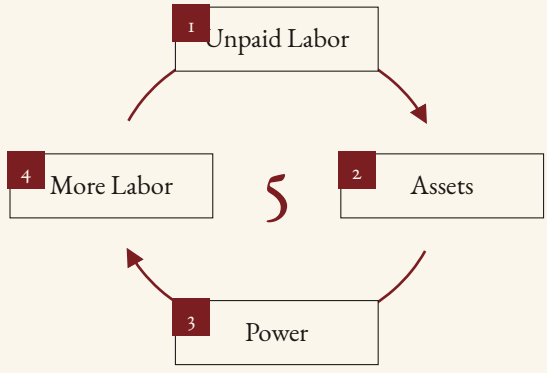
Techniques that feed it. 2 · Weaponized Generosity, 22 · Benevolent Control, 26 · Financial Control, 30 · Plausible Deniability.

Why it closes. The good work is the source of the standing that keeps the accounts closed, and the closed accounts make it impossible to see how much of the money goes to aid and how much to leverage.

Where it could be broken, and by whom. It weakens where donors and governments require conditions and advocacy spending to be disclosed (section 9, aid pipeline), and where Congress amends the exemption; section 5 records that it "is a statute, not a law of nature". This paragraph is analysis, not a documented finding.

An example from this page. openDemocracy's 2020 investigation found legal and legislative campaigns against LGBTQ rights and reproductive access funded from the US in African, Eastern European and Latin American countries, framed as family support (section 16).

5 · Unpaid Labor to Assets to Power to More Labor



Volunteers give unpaid hours, the institution holds what those hours help build, and when a volunteer leaves the role is refilled.

How it runs.

1. Members give unpaid hours to childcare, worship, setup, youth work and outreach, framed as serving the Lord (techniques 13 and 26).
2. The leadership is paid and the workforce is not (section 9).
3. Building campaigns bind members to multi-year pledges (section 9).
4. The assets are held by the institution, and volunteers have no equity in what their hours build (section 16).

5. When a volunteer burns out and leaves, the role is refilled and called "God providing" (technique 29).

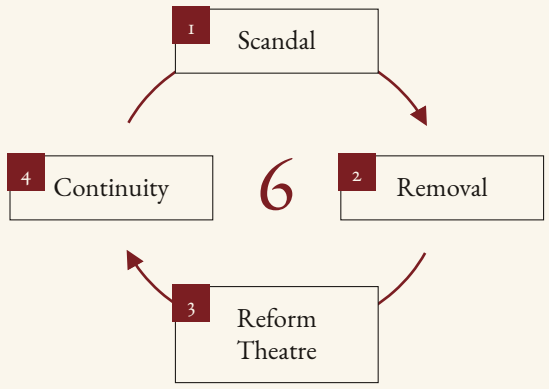
Techniques that feed it. 26 · Financial Control, 13 · Normalization / Desensitization, 19 · Manufactured Consent, 29 · Replacement.

Why it closes. Value flows one way, from labor to title, and the people who produce it hold no office that decides how it is used. Refusing is treated as spiritual failure (technique 26).

Where it could be broken, and by whom. It weakens where a volunteer can say no without loss of standing, and where treasurers and finance volunteers decline to sign off on accounts they have not been allowed to see in full (section 18). This paragraph is analysis, not a documented finding.

An example from this page. Technique 28 describes a volunteer who gave years of unpaid labor and was removed from ministry after raising concerns.

6 · Scandal to Removal to Reform Theatre to Continuity



A founder-pastor falls, the church is renamed or dissolved, and, as this page predicts without a source, the same network platforms him again within three years.

How it runs.

1. Allegations about a founder are exposed by journalists or by a later investigation rather than by elders (sections 14 and 19).
2. By the time findings arrive, the founder has resigned, left or died; the RZIM and Willow Creek findings came after the founders had left or died (section 19).
3. The church rebrands, dissolves or carries on; Mars Hill's churches closed (section 19).
4. The architecture stays: founder-pastors of independent churches with boards they appointed and no denomination above them (section 14).
5. The next case arises in a church with the same structure (section 14, prediction).

Techniques that feed it. 18 · Silent Treatment / Stonewalling, 12 · DARVO, 25 · Spiritual Bypassing, 29 · Replacement, 30 · Plausible Deniability.

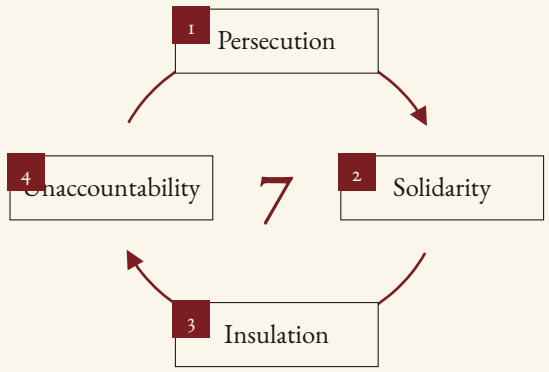
Why it closes. Accountability reaches the individual and stops there. Where no body sits above the pastor, the only court is the board the pastor appointed (section 7), so the structure that produced the case survives it.

Where it could be broken, and by whom. Section 7 names the question that would break it: who can say no to this office, and when did they last do it? It weakens where a congregation places an independent body above the pastor, and where state regulators and attorneys general compel an answer,

since under congregational polity they are usually the only bodies that can (section 8). This paragraph is analysis, not a documented finding.

An example from this page. Mars Hill Church in Seattle, with some 15 locations, dissolved in 2014 after its founder resigned, and "no body above the founder had existed to act sooner" (section 19).

7 · Persecution to Solidarity to Insulation to Unaccountability



Persecution narratives are preached as spiritual danger, and questions about money, abuse or leadership are then recast as attacks on the faith.

How it runs.

1. Persecution narratives and culture-war panic are preached as spiritual danger (technique 27).
2. A question about money, abuse or leadership is recast as an attack by the enemy or as persecution (techniques 12 and 27).
3. The person asking is labeled bitter, divisive or under demonic attack (technique 17).
4. Members close ranks and carry the message: forgive, stop gossiping, protect unity (technique 16).
5. The question goes unanswered, and "We have nothing to hide" stands beside an exemption from disclosure (section 14).

Techniques that feed it. 27 · Manufactured Crisis, 17 · Smear Campaign, 16 · Flying Monkeys, 11 · Projection, 12 · DARVO.

Why it closes. Each new question can be read as more proof of hostility, so the questions strengthen the solidarity that shields the institution from them.

Where it could be broken, and by whom. It weakens when members treat a financial question as a request for a document rather than an attack. Section 20 records people inside the tradition doing this: evangelical journalists investigating their own movement, and MinistryWatch rating ministries on transparency. This paragraph is analysis, not a documented finding.

An example from this page. Technique 12 describes a congregation told to pray for the pastor's "persecution" while the victim is pressured to stay silent for the sake of the church's witness.

WHY THIS MATTERS TO YOU

The loops explain why good people stay in arrangements they would never sign up for from scratch. The more you have already put in, the harder it is to walk away. Researchers call this the sunk-cost effect (Arkes & Blumer, 1985), and it works on time, money and relationships alike. Ask yourself: if you were starting today, knowing what you know, would you join?

The seven loops below show how the practices connect, so that each step makes the next one easier and the last step feeds the first.

14 Say versus do

BEFORE YOU READ

Direct, checkable comparisons: a public statement on one side, the documented record on the other, and the receipt that links them. This is the most falsifiable section on the page, because each row either matches its source or it doesn't.

What they say, what the record shows

THEY SAY	THE RECORD SHOWS	RECEIPT
We are a family here.	Families do not have a membership covenant, a discipline procedure, or a category of person who is announced from the front and then not spoken to.	PATTERN OBSERVED
Giving is between you and God.	Attendance and giving are tracked, and standing for leadership roles is frequently conditioned on both.	PATTERN OBSERVED
We have nothing to hide.	The sector retains the broadest exemption from public financial disclosure in U.S. law: churches, their auxiliaries and conventions file no Form 990 [2].	OFFICIAL POLICY · §6033

Accountability or theatre?

Last time the chair ran. At Mars Hill, Willow Creek and RZIM the founders were gone by resignation, retirement or death, and the same architecture was left intact each time.

Who holds the chair now. Founder-pastors of independent churches hold it, with boards they appointed and no denomination above them.

Prediction. This is a prediction, not a documented finding: the next one will probably be exposed by journalists rather than elders, the church may rebrand, and the man may be preaching somewhere again within three years.

Words used here

TERM	WHAT IT MEANS INSIDE	WHAT IT DOES	SAID PLAINLY
Forgiveness (as an instruction)	It means releasing a wrong done against you.	It is central to the faith. As an instrument it is deployed early, at the victim, and frequently as a substitute for any consequence to the person who caused the harm.	'Stop pursuing this.'
Reconciliation	It means the restoration of a broken relationship.	It frequently means restoring the harmed person to proximity with the person who harmed them, before safety and often before acknowledgement.	'Be near them again.'
Grace (applied selectively)	It means unearned favour.	Watch its direction of travel. It is extended lavishly to leaders who have caused harm, and rarely to members who have caused inconvenience.	'He is forgiven; you are still a problem.'

Founder-pastors of independent churches hold it, with boards they appointed and no denomination above them.

WHY THIS MATTERS TO YOU

Test one row yourself. Pick a "they say" line you have actually heard said in person, then read the receipt. If the record matches the statement, this page is wrong about that row, and you should tell us. If it doesn't, what does it mean that you had never seen the receipt?

15 Cost & cover

BEFORE YOU READ

What leaving actually costs here, in family, work, housing, money and legal status, and how each of those costs is officially denied. Where the cost is low, the page says so plainly.

What leaving costs

- Leaving can cost a person their community and social network and strain their family, and in high-control congregations it can bring formal shunning or 'church discipline' announcements.
- People can lose their jobs where employment runs through the church network (staff, schools, ministries).
- Leaving is framed as a spiritual threat: hell, apostasy (abandoning the faith), 'shipwrecked faith' (a phrase from 1 Timothy 1:19 for faith that has been lost). VARIES BY COMMUNITY

The ledger of exit

COST	DOCUMENTED?	DETAIL	THE OFFICIAL DENIAL
Family and community loss	Often	Relationships cool, and high-control congregations make formal 'church discipline' announcements.	“Nobody is stopping them — that's their choice.”
Financial and employment loss	Sometimes	People lose jobs at a church, school or ministry, and housing tied to staff roles.	“Employment decisions are separate from doctrine.”

Spiritual threat	Commonly	Leavers are warned of hell, apostasy and 'shipwrecked faith,' and prayers for their return are framed as concern.	“It's a loving warning, not a threat.”
Reputation damage	Frequently	The pulpit refers to leavers' divisiveness, bitterness or 'unresolved sin.'	“We only shared prayer requests.”

How the cost is denied

CHANNEL	LEVEL	NOTE
Explicit policy	Low	Tithing expectations, membership covenants, and discipline procedures are written down in many churches — the receipt exists.
Informal enforcement	High	Most pressure is social: who gets invited, trusted, platformed, or quietly frozen out.
Leadership distance	High	Congregational autonomy lets denominations disclaim any local abuse, and independent churches answer to no one at all.
Doctrinal ambiguity	Medium	'Submission,' 'covering,' and 'accountability' can be reinterpreted after harm as having been misunderstood.
Cultural outsourcing	High	Control is attributed to family values, regional culture, or 'that's just how our people are.'
Volunteer enforcement	High	Small-group leaders and lay members do the shaming; leadership never has to.
Sacred secrecy	Medium	Pastoral confidentiality and elder-board privacy shield internal investigations from members.
Exit cost denial	High	The standard line is that leaving is free — while the shunning is performed by members, not policy.

WHY THIS MATTERS TO YOU

The price of leaving is usually paid in relationships, not money: friends who cool, a small group that stops texting, sometimes a public "church discipline" announcement. If you work for a church, a school or a ministry, your job is on the line too. If you have ever held back a doubt because of who you'd lose, then this cost has already been shaping what you say.

16 The ledger

BEFORE YOU READ

The balance sheet. It shows who benefits, who pays, and what leverage flows back to the institution in return for what it gives.

Who benefits

- Senior and founding pastors of independent churches benefit when they control the board that sets their compensation. PATTERN OBSERVED

- Denominational headquarters and agencies funded by assessments on congregations benefit.
- The Christian media-industrial complex benefits: broadcasting networks, publishing houses, worship-music licensing and conference circuits. These revenue streams require a continuously mobilized, guilt-motivated audience. **PATTERN OBSERVED**
- Political operations benefit, converting congregational trust into votes and donor lists. **PATTERN OBSERVED**

Money out, leverage back

- American conservative Christian organizations have funded legal and legislative campaigns against LGBTQ rights and reproductive access in African, Eastern European, and Latin American countries — exporting policy through local partners while framing the work as family support. Aid arrives, and with it, a legislative agenda the recipient population never voted on. **INVESTIGATIVE REPORT ·** openDemocracy, 2020 — 28 US groups, at least $280m spent abroad, 2007–2018
- Faith-based aid and development organizations hold major humanitarian contracts. The genuine relief work is real. So is the fact that access to food, schooling, and clinics in some contexts arrives inside a religious framework recipients cannot refuse without losing the service. **ACADEMIC SOURCE**
- The tax exemption is the quiet subsidy: churches receive full charitable status while exempt from the public financial disclosure almost every other charity files. The public funds the exemption; the public — including members — is denied the accounting. **OFFICIAL POLICY**

Who pays

- Children pay, absorbing hell teaching and purity shame with no ability to consent or evaluate.
- Women in complementarian marriages pay, losing structural standing to refuse or leave.
- LGBTQ members pay in family, belonging and, in documented cases, their safety.
- Abuse survivors pay, pressured into forgiveness and internal process rather than police.
- Poor members pay, tithing from insufficient income while leadership is salaried.
- Volunteers pay with unpaid hours that build assets they will never have equity in.

Sources for this section: [9]

Senior and founding pastors of independent churches benefit when they control the board that sets their compensation.

WHY THIS MATTERS TO YOU

Find yourself in this table. Are you among those who benefit, those who pay, or both? Most readers are both. The question is whether the exchange was ever explained to you in these terms, and whether you would agree to it if it had been.

17 Who gets hurt most

BEFORE YOU READ

Where the weight lands hardest, and what it compounds with: poverty, childhood, gender, a lack of civil alternatives. This is the human stakes stated plainly.

Where the weight lands

The costs in section 15 do not fall evenly. They fall hardest where a person has the least power inside the institution and the fewest places to go outside it. The table names who carries the most, how, and what makes it worse.

WHO	HOW	WHAT IT COMPOUNDS WITH
Children	They receive eternal-punishment teaching and purity shame before abstract reasoning develops.	The harm compounds in a home where the parent's authority and the institution's are the same voice.
Women in complementarian marriages	They have no doctrinal standing to refuse, and counsel routes them back to submission.	The harm compounds catastrophically with financial dependence and no independent income.

LGBTQ members, and LGBTQ children	They are excluded from membership, leadership and family belonging.	The harm compounds for a minor in a household that agrees with the exclusion.
Abuse survivors	They face pressure to forgive, internal process, and failures to report.	The harm compounds where the accused holds the pastoral relationship with the survivor's family.
The working poor	They are taught to give ten percent of a wage that does not cover rent, as a test of faith.	The harm compounds where benevolence funds are administered by the same office that set the expectation.

WHY THIS MATTERS TO YOU

The table puts children first, and for a reason. Teaching about eternal punishment, and shame about sex, reach children before they can weigh either. If you are a parent, ask what your child has heard about hell by the age of seven, and from whom. If you are a woman in a marriage your church calls "complementarian", ask where the counsel goes if the marriage becomes unsafe. The table's answer is: back to submission.

18 The middle tiers

BEFORE YOU READ

The people in the middle: local clergy, teachers, officials and volunteers who apply rules they did not write. The section exists so that an institution is not collapsed into a monolith, and so that people in the middle can see their own position in it.

Most of the institution's work is done below the pastor, by people who see the decisions without making them. Small-group leaders, treasurers, youth and children's workers, and elders each carry part of the load, and each stands at one point where the next decision could be declined. The table sets out what each tier does, what it sees, what it is asked to do and where it could refuse.

ROLE	DOES	SEES	IS ASKED TO	COULD REFUSE
Small-group and Bible-study leaders	Hold the pastoral relationship with twelve people and report concerns upward	Who is doubting, whose marriage is failing, who has stopped giving	'Keep leadership informed'	Pass along a private confidence as a prayer request
Treasurers and finance volunteers	Count, bank, and reconcile	The compensation line, the discretionary fund, and the gap between the appeal and the need	Treat the numbers as confidential	Sign off on accounts they have not been permitted to see in full
Youth and children's workers	Run the programme that shapes children before they can evaluate it	Which adults seek unsupervised access	Handle concerns internally first	Accept any policy that routes a disclosure anywhere before the police
Elders and board members	Formally hold the authority the pastor exercises	That they were appointed by the person they oversee	Present unanimity	Vote yes on a budget they cannot explain to the congregation

WHY THIS MATTERS TO YOU

If you are a local leader, a teacher or a volunteer, this section is about you. It is not an accusation: most of the people who carry out a rule did not write it. But the middle tier is also where a rule is most often quietly softened, or quietly enforced. Which do you do, and what would happen to you if you chose differently?

19 Documented cases

BEFORE YOU READ

Named, dated, sourced incidents: court records, government inquiries, regulators' findings and on-the-record reporting. Read the outcome lines in particular. They show what actually changed, if anything.

The Smyth review and a resignation (England, 2024)

WHEN: 2024

WHAT: The Makin Review found that the Church of England failed to act on abuse by John Smyth, a barrister who ran Christian camps, for decades. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, resigned on 12 November 2024 [6].

RECORD: *The Makin Review* (Nov 2024) [6]

OUTCOME: The highest office in the Anglican Communion was vacated over a safeguarding failure [6][7].

TACTICS: 30 · Plausible Deniability, 18 · Silent Treatment / Stonewalling

GRADE: DOCUMENTED

The list the convention said it could not keep (United States, 2022)

WHEN: 2022

WHAT: An independent investigation found Southern Baptist executive staff kept a private list of accused ministers for years while telling survivors the convention's structure made such a list impossible [8].

RECORD: Guidepost Solutions, *Report of the Independent Investigation* (22 May 2022) [8]

OUTCOME: The promised public database was never launched (see Protestant / Evangelical).

TACTICS: 30 · Plausible Deniability, 6 · Gaslighting

GRADE: DOCUMENTED

A megachurch that dissolved (United States, 2014)

WHEN: 2014

WHAT: Mars Hill Church in Seattle, with some 15 locations, dissolved after its founder, Mark Driscoll, resigned in October 2014. The church's own board of overseers had found him at times "guilty of arrogance, responding to conflict with a quick temper and harsh speech, and leading the staff and elders in a domineering manner" [36]. In 2007 the church had fired two pastors, Paul Petry and Bent Meyer, who had warned against changes that concentrated leadership power; the elders who made that decision later confessed they were wrong [37]. The collapse was reported in depth by *Christianity Today* [11].

RECORD: *Christianity Today*, *The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill* [11]

OUTCOME: The churches closed; no body above the founder had existed to act sooner [11].

TACTICS: 28 · Discard

GRADE: DOCUMENTED

A posthumous investigation (United States, 2021)

WHEN: 2021

WHAT: An investigation commissioned by the board of Ravi Zacharias International Ministries found that its late founder had sexually abused massage therapists; an earlier review of Willow Creek Community Church (2019) had found allegations against its founder credible [12].

RECORD: Miller & Martin report (Feb 2021); Willow Creek Independent Advisory Group (Feb 2019) [12]

OUTCOME: Both findings came after the founders had left or died [12].

TACTICS: 30 · Plausible Deniability, 18 · Silent Treatment / Stonewalling

GRADE: DOCUMENTED

WHY THIS MATTERS TO YOU

These are not hypotheticals. Four documented cases on this page rest on a named record. The most common reaction to documented cases is "that was them, not us." Before settling on that, read the outcome lines. Did anything change in the structure that allowed each case to happen, or did one person leave while the structure stayed?

20 Precedent

BEFORE YOU READ

What has already been broken once, somewhere, and what would count as real change here. It is a benchmark, not a prediction.

It has been broken before

WHAT	WHO	WHEN	WHAT IT COST
Christianity Today's reporting on Mars Hill and the wider accountability press	Evangelical journalists investigating their own movement	2014–present	It brought sustained hostility from the institutions they cover.
#ChurchToo and survivor-led accountability networks [38]	Survivors of abuse in church settings	2017–present	Not recorded on this page.
MinistryWatch and financial transparency ratings	Independent evaluators inside the tradition	1990s–present	Most large ministries refused to cooperate.

What would change this page

Voluntary, audited, member-facing public accounts by the major U.S. denominations — adopted without a change in the law — would revise this page's financial-opacity findings at their root.

Sources for this section: [10] [11] [38]

WHY THIS MATTERS TO YOU

Some rows here record a change that has already happened somewhere; others name what would count as change here. When you are told something "can't change", it is fair to ask: can't, or won't? And who decided?

21 Voices from inside

BEFORE YOU READ

People from inside Christianity who raised the hard question publicly, often at real cost. They answer the objection that criticism only ever comes from outsiders.

- **Rachael Denhollander.** An abuse survivor and lawyer, she advised the Southern Baptist task force behind the 2022 investigation. In December 2025 Baptist News Global reported allegations of conflicting roles in that work, which she denies [19] [20].

- **The survivors of John Smyth.** Their persistence produced the Makin Review [6].
- **MinistryWatch.** An evangelical watchdog, it has rated ministries on transparency since 1998 [10].
- **The reporters of *The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill*.** Evangelical journalists at *Christianity Today* reported in depth on the collapse of a church in their own movement [11].
- **Christa Brown.** A Baptist abuse survivor, author and retired attorney who for nearly twenty years pressed Southern Baptist leaders to act on clergy abuse, and met resistance and hostility from some on the Executive Committee, as the Guidepost report records [8 39].

WHY THIS MATTERS TO YOU

Were these people traitors, or the most loyal members their tradition had? Most were treated as the first at the time, and some are honored as the second now. If someone in your community raised one of these questions tomorrow, how would they be treated, and by you?

22 Regional variants

BEFORE YOU READ

The same tradition under different governments. What a member can say, leave, marry or inherit depends heavily on the state, and these cards show how differently it plays out.

United States

APEX: There is no apex for the whole; every denomination governs itself.

LAW: Churches file no Form 990, and clergy housing allowances are tax-free [1][2][3].

DOCUMENTED: The record covers the Guidepost investigation (2022) [8] and the Mars Hill, RZIM and Willow Creek findings [11][12].

EXIT: Leaving is legally free; the costs are social, family and, where the church is the employer or school, economic.

REGULATOR: State attorneys general act as regulators. The IRS can examine a church only under the restricted church tax inquiry procedure of IRC section 7611 [28].

TELL: The country with the most Christians in the world publishes the least about their churches' money.

England

APEX: The Archbishop of Canterbury leads the church, with the Crown and Parliament in the background [7] [17].

LAW: The church is established by law, and its bishops sit in the Lords [17].

DOCUMENTED: The record covers the Makin Review and the Archbishop's resignation [6].

EXIT: Leaving is legally free, though the church is also a large employer and school provider.

REGULATOR: The Charity Commission regulates churches that are charities, and Parliament oversees the establishment.

TELL: It is the only state where a church's bishops sit in the national legislature by right [17], and where the church's top office fell over a safeguarding review.

Germany

APEX: The Catholic bishops' conference and the Protestant EKD (Evangelical Church in Germany) lead the two main churches.

LAW: The state collects church tax [18].

DOCUMENTED: The state collected €12.84bn in church tax in 2025 [18].

EXIT: Leaving takes a formal civil declaration, which ends the tax.

REGULATOR: The state that collects the tax is the regulator, and the churches publish the totals [18].

TELL: Leaving a church here is a government form — and the numbers on the chart are why the churches watch who files it.

WHY THIS MATTERS TO YOU

This page covers the United States, England and Germany. Your country changes what this tradition can do to you, and what you can do about it. If you live somewhere not listed, ask which of these cards your country most resembles. If you are a voter, note that each of these arrangements was chosen by a government.

23 The questions

BEFORE YOU READ

The six questions the documented record could not resolve. Each is set out below: why it is being asked, and a concrete example already on this page that it points back to.

QUESTION 1 OF 6

If there is nothing to hide, why is your church exempt from the financial disclosure that almost every other charity in the country must file — and why has your leadership never volunteered it anyway?

WHY THIS IS ASKED

Churches are exempt from filing disclosures that almost every other charity has to file. So the only way members will ever see the accounts is if the church volunteers them. The question asks why so few churches do, when "nothing to hide" costs nothing to prove.

EXAMPLE ALREADY ON THIS PAGE

The say-do table sets "We have nothing to hide" beside the record: the sector retains the broadest exemption from public financial disclosure in U.S. law (§6033).

QUESTION 2 OF 6

Why does the man who preaches sacrificial giving decline to publish his own compensation?

WHY THIS IS ASKED

Preaching sacrificial giving puts a cost on the congregation. Publishing the preacher's own pay is the only way to show that the sacrifice is shared. The question is about consistency, not about the size of the salary.

EXAMPLE ALREADY ON THIS PAGE

The scorecard marks Pay as N: no public source anywhere establishes what leaders are paid. The money section also records that clergy housing allowances are tax-free under IRC §107.

QUESTION 3 OF 6

When an allegation was made against someone on staff, who investigated it? Was it anyone who did not report to the accused?

WHY THIS IS ASKED

An investigation run by someone who reports to the accused is not independent, whatever its conclusions. This question checks structure, not honesty. Who could the investigator afford to find against?

EXAMPLE ALREADY ON THIS PAGE

The cases section records that Southern Baptist executive staff kept a private list of accused ministers for years while telling survivors that such a list was structurally impossible. It took an independent firm, Guidepost Solutions in 2022, to find it. It also records two founders whose misconduct was confirmed only after they had left or died.

QUESTION 4 OF 6

Why is a rule about honoring leadership always invoked at the exact moment leadership is being questioned, and never at any other time?

WHY THIS IS ASKED

A rule invoked only when leaders are criticized works as a shield, not as a teaching. The question asks you to notice when the rule is used, rather than argue about whether it is scriptural.

EXAMPLE ALREADY ON THIS PAGE

The reach section records that critics and former members are pre-labeled as bitter, deceived or spiritually attacked. That discounts their testimony before anyone has heard it.

QUESTION 5 OF 6

If leaving is genuinely free, name one person who left and kept every relationship they had. Then name one who lost most of them.

WHY THIS IS ASKED

"You're free to leave" is only true if leaving costs something bearable. Asking for two real names turns a slogan into a test anyone can run in their own congregation.

EXAMPLE ALREADY ON THIS PAGE

The cost section's ledger lists family and community loss as "Often" documented. In high-control congregations it adds formal shunning and discipline announcements.

QUESTION 6 OF 6

You were taught that doubt is dangerous. Ask who is endangered by it — your soul, or the budget?

WHY THIS IS ASKED

Doubt threatens beliefs, but it also threatens attendance and giving. The question separates the two, so that a member can ask which one is actually being protected when doubt is discouraged.

EXAMPLE ALREADY ON THIS PAGE

The say-do table records that "giving is between you and God," while attendance and giving are tracked, and eligibility for leadership roles often depends on both.

In closing

Here is what you were never told: a truth that is actually true does not need your ignorance to survive. If the resurrection happened, it happened whether or not you read the church's financial statements. So the refusal to show you the books cannot be about protecting your faith. It is about protecting something else, and you are permitted to ask what.

You are not being asked to stop praying. You are being asked to stop conflating God with the office that claims to represent Him — because that conflation is not your theology. It was installed, deliberately, by people whose position depends on you never separating the two.

WHY THIS MATTERS TO YOU

Choose one question and ask it this month, out loud, to a real person who could answer it. Then write down what happened. Were you answered, redirected, or told that asking was the problem? Whichever it was, the response is information.

24 Leaving safely here

BEFORE YOU READ

Practical, non-theological guidance for someone who needs to step back or step away safely. It is a safety document, not an argument.

This is practical guidance, not legal advice.

1. **Leaving is legally free** almost everywhere Christians live; the costs are social, family and sometimes economic (church schools, church employers).
2. **In Germany,** leaving is a formal civil declaration that ends church tax [18].
3. **If you were abused,** go to the police or child-protection services first, not the church.
4. **Find support** that is not run by a church [21] [22] [23].

WHY THIS MATTERS TO YOU

Even if this section is not for you, it may be for someone you know. Most people who leave a high-demand community say that the first person who listened without trying to argue them back mattered more than anything else. Could that person be you?

25 Where to get help

BEFORE YOU READ

Organizations that can help, each checked directly against its own site, with the date of the check. Nothing here is endorsed beyond that check.

Checked 2026-09-27.

ORGANIZATION (continued)	FOR	WHERE	CONTACT
Recovering from Religion	People questioning or leaving faith	US, Canada and online	**(844) 368-2848** [21]
Faith to Faithless	People leaving high-control religion	UK	**0800 448 0748** (freephone; Monday 10:00–13:00, Wednesday 10:00–13:00, Thursday 16:00–19:00 UK time) [22]
ICSA	Former members of high-control groups; families	International	Via website [23]
SNAP	Survivors of clergy abuse, across churches	US and international	Via website [24]
NAPAC	Adult survivors of childhood abuse	UK	**0808 801 0331** [25]
Childhelp	Child abuse	US	**1-800-422-4453** [26]
RAINN	Sexual assault	US	**1-800-656-4673** [27]

WHY THIS MATTERS TO YOU

Save one contact now, before anyone needs it:

Recovering from Religion (people questioning or leaving faith; US, Canada and online). People in crisis rarely have the energy to research options. Having a name ready is one of the most useful things you can do for someone else.



26

Sources

BEFORE YOU READ

Every numbered citation on this page, with a named, checkable source. Spot-check a few before trusting the rest; that is the honest way to read any page in this book, including this one.

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WHY THIS MATTERS TO YOU

Don't take this page's word for anything either. People tend to believe a claim more the more often they have heard it, whether or not it is true; this is the "illusory truth effect" (Hasher, Goldstein & Toppino, 1977). Spot-check three citations at random. If any fails, tell us, and it will be corrected and logged.

27 What changed on this page

BEFORE YOU READ

A dated log of what changed on this page: corrections, additions and new sources. Changes are logged in public rather than made quietly.

- **2026-10-03:** Corrected how the page describes the church exemption from public financial accounts: churches are the largest group excused from filing, not the only one, and the IRS can examine a church under a restricted procedure. Corrected the Crassus reference in Luther's thesis 86, named the Bible passages behind the genealogy cards, and removed claims they did not support. Aligned the Protestant, Pentecostal and Orthodox sizes with the family volumes. Regraded seven techniques and removed "sourced" from five that named no document, so the counts now read Taught 15, Cultural 11, Documented 3 and Codified 1. Dropped Hillsong from the list of founder collapses because the page documents no case, and recorded what the Mars Hill findings were. Added Rachael Denhollander's denial, the remand of *Chiles v. Salazar*, and the churches' own publication of German church-tax figures. Replaced the Archbishop of Canterbury entry in the voices section with Christa Brown, relabelled rows that had no source, and added sources 28 to 39.
- **2026-09-27:** Checked against the sources and corrected: openDemocracy figures now cited; "uniquely among charities" softened; Catholics 1.4 billion; *Chiles v. Salazar* (2026) added; Mullally installed March 2026.
- **2026-09-27:** Added Branches, Law & state, Money in numbers, four documented cases, Voices from inside, three regional cards, Leaving safely and Where to get help.

WHY THIS MATTERS TO YOU

This page keeps a public log of its own changes, mistakes included. Does the institution you belong to, give to, or were raised in keep one like it? If not, how would you know what it got wrong, and when?

Colophon

Set in EB Garamond (SIL Open Font License), regular, italic and bold, with true small capitals and old-style figures in text and lining tabular figures in tables. Laid out with Paged.js in Chromium from the same Markdown that feeds the website. US Letter, single-sided, tagged for accessibility and checked against PDF/UA-1 with veraPDF. Built 2026-10-27. Text checked 2026-10-03.

Palette: ink, oxblood, gold, cream, rule. Seven type sizes. Rules of 0.4 pt and 2 pt only.