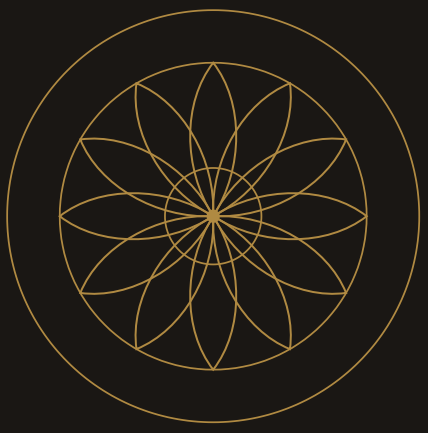


THE SACRED DIVIDE

THE FULL RECORD

Protestant / Evangelical Christianity

Christianity family

HONOR THE FAITH · NAME THE MACHINERY

TEXT CHECKED 2026-10-03

Before you begin

This is the record of Protestant / Evangelical 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 Protestant / Evangelical 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	About 800 million (Pew counted 801 million Protestants in 2011), and up to 1 billion on wider definitions. Pew counts 584 million Pentecostal and charismatic Christians (those who emphasize gifts of the Holy Spirit such as healing and speaking in tongues) across all traditions, Catholic charismatics included, so they are not a subset of the Protestant total [19]. **ACADEMIC SOURCE** · Pew, WCD
WHO'S IN CHARGE	In most independent churches the top office is the founder's chair, held by the founder or by the founder's family. Megachurch (very large church) pulpits have passed to spouses and sons in several churches.
CHOSEN BY	The founder, plus a board he selected.
REMOVABLE BY	The board he appointed — the arrangement the U.S. Senate's Grassley inquiry documented and could not penetrate.

MONEY IN ONE LINE	Tithing (giving a tenth of income) is preached as a covenant obligation, and the prosperity gospel (the teaching that faith and giving bring health and wealth) turns giving into an investment product, with seed-faith donations promising divine returns. **LEADERSHIP STATEMENT** · recorded sermons of prosperity teachers
LEAVING IN ONE LINE	Leaving can cost the total social world megachurches deliberately build (groups, childcare, schools, employment).
THE UNANSWERED QUESTION	If membership is voluntary and the church has nothing to hide, why did departing staff have to sign non-disclosure agreements?
EVIDENCE	Two of the 30 techniques are sourced to a named document. The grades are Taught 18, Cultural 10 and Documented 2.
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 "The founder, plus a board he selected", and to who can remove its holder, "The board he appointed — the arrangement the U.S. Senate's Grassley inquiry documented and could not penetrate". 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.

Tyler · A Tuesday in August · A megachurch campus in the American Sun Belt

Staff prayer at 8:15. Twenty-two people in a circle, and Tyler leads it because the campus pastor (the pastor in charge of one site of a multi-site church) asked him to on Sunday, in front of others, in the way that is not really a question.

He is the worship leader. He is twenty-nine and has been on staff four years, and last month he signed a new employment agreement that his fiancée's brother, who is a lawyer, read and then read again and then said *huh*. There is a clause about not making disparaging statements. Tyler signed it because the alternative was not signing it, and this is the only job he has ever had that used what he can do.

Rehearsal. They run the closing song four times because the campus pastor wants the key change to land under the giving talk. Tyler understands the architecture of this completely. He built parts of it. It works because the songs are good and because people are actually meeting God in the room, and both of those things are true at the same time and he has stopped trying to separate them.

At lunch he sees a text from Kayla, who was on the creative team until March. She left after something with the executive pastor (the senior staff member who runs the church's operations) that nobody explains the same way twice. Her text says *hey are you okay*. He types *yeah!!* and then sits looking at the two exclamation marks.

Small group at seven, at his house, eleven people. A guy named Marcus asks, sideways, whether anyone knows what the building fund is actually at. There is a pause of about two seconds that Tyler feels in his neck. He says he'll ask. He knows he will not ask.

Eleven-forty. He is on the back steps with a guitar he isn't playing. He thinks about the fact that he can name every person in his life and that all of them are from here, and that the thought did not use to frighten him, and then he goes inside because tomorrow is Wednesday and Wednesdays start at seven.

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.

> You may have met God at a youth camp with your arms in the air, and it may have been the most real thing that ever happened to you. Nothing here takes that. But if your church was independent, you were also handed a system with no bishop, no board that isn't hand-picked, and no one your pastor answers to — and you were taught to call that freedom.

THE UNANSWERED QUESTION

If membership is voluntary and the church has nothing to hide, why did departing staff have to sign non-disclosure agreements?

The widest gap between word and record

THEY SAY	THE RECORD SHOWS	RECEIPT
We are financially accountable.	Most of the ministries examined by a Senate inquiry declined to provide full disclosure, and the inquiry ended without penalties.	GOVERNMENT REPORT

One cost of leaving, beside its denial

COST	DOCUMENTED?	DETAIL	THE OFFICIAL DENIAL
Total social world	Yes	The church supplied friends, childcare, school, a small group, and often employment.	"They're free to go anywhere."

The strongest objection, answered

The objection. You are cherry-picking megachurch scandals and calling it the whole movement.

What is true in it. Most congregations are small, poor, and locally accountable, and most pastors earn less than the schoolteachers in their pews.

The answer. The pattern is what makes it more than cherry-picking: the same architecture appears each time — founder, appointed board, no external oversight. And much of the reporting that exposed it came from the evangelical press itself, which is why the claim is not an outside attack.

The Southern Baptist record was first documented at scale by the secular *Houston Chronicle* and *San Antonio Express-News* in 2019 [33].

WHY THIS MATTERS TO YOU

Try answering the unanswered question yourself: *If membership is voluntary and the church has nothing to hide, why did departing staff have to sign non-disclosure agreements?* 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 Protestant / Evangelical 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.

> Protestant and evangelical Christianity is a vast family, from mainline denominations to megachurches, Pentecostal networks and independent congregations. It numbers roughly 800M–1B people globally, and its fastest-growing wing is Pentecostal/charismatic Christianity in the Global South.

Healthy practice here looks like churches with plural elders (authority shared among several elders), open books, outside audits, and pastors on published salaries.

The tradition has its own press, and that press has exposed its own. *Christianity Today* reported the rise and fall of Mars Hill [12] and the investigation of RZIM's founder [13]; MinistryWatch reports on the movement's own institutions [21]; and survivor-led accountability

movements (#ChurchToo, in which survivors publicly named abuse in churches) have pressed for accountability.

Some of that standard is already on the record. Southern Baptist messengers voted for an independent investigation of their own Executive Committee; its report was published in 2022, and the Executive Committee then released its list of accused ministers [7] [8]. Ravi Zacharias International Ministries commissioned an outside investigation of its late founder and made the finding public [13]. In 2013 Alan Chambers apologized to gay people and shut down Exodus International [16], and in 2018 Joshua Harris discontinued his own bestseller, *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* [17]. In England and Wales, churches that are registered charities file public accounts [6]. Each is a place where members or institutions met the standard this page applies, and each is recorded here as credit.

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.

The 16th-century Reformation broke the Catholic monopoly with the 'priesthood of all believers' (the teaching that every believer can read, interpret and stand before God without a priest as middleman). Evangelical revivalism in the 18th and 19th centuries built a voluntary, entrepreneurial religion. In the 20th century, Pentecostalism and broadcast media created the megachurch and televangelism models.

Timeline

HISTORY AT A GLANCE



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

1 1517–1555

Luther's protest; Reformation spreads under princely protection

Breaking Rome's monopoly required state sponsors — new establishments replaced the old.

2 1530S–1600S

Confessions written; state churches established; radical reformers persecuted

'Priesthood of all believers' coexists with new coercive orthodoxies.

3 1730S–1800S

Great Awakenings; revivalism; voluntary societies

Religion becomes entrepreneurial: persuasion, emotion, and audience replace inherited parish.

4 1800S

Global missions bound to colonial expansion; Bible and tract societies

Mass media religion begins; conversion becomes a measurable output.

5 1900–1930

Pentecostal revival (Azusa Street); fundamentalist–modernist controversy

Experience and inerrancy become rival authority bases.

6 1940S–1970S

Billy Graham crusades; radio and television ministry; parachurch empires

Charisma decouples from any denomination that could discipline it.

7 1970S–1990S

Religious Right mobilization; prosperity gospel; church growth movement

Congregations become political constituencies and marketing targets.

8 1980S–2000S

Televangelist scandals; Senate (Grassley) inquiry 2007–2011

Financial opacity documented at the federal level with no penalties following. GOVERNMENT REPORT

9 2010S–PRESENT

Megachurch collapses (Mars Hill, Willow Creek, Hillsong, RZIM); #ChurchToo

Same architecture each time: founder, hand-picked board, no external accountability. INVESTIGATIVE REPORT

10 2019

Houston Chronicle and San Antonio Express-News publish "Abuse of Faith"

About 380 Southern Baptist leaders and volunteers are shown to have been accused of sexual misconduct since 1998, three years before the denomination's own commissioned investigation. INVESTIGATIVE REPORT [33]

11 PRESENT

Global South Pentecostalism is the growth engine; Western deconstruction wave

The tradition's future is African, Latin American, and Asian — with the same structural risks.

Moments in the room

1979 — A VOTER REGISTRATION LIST BECOMES A MOVEMENT

The Moral Majority (a conservative political organization) organized congregations into a voting bloc, delivering political power to pastors who answered to no bishop and, in the independent churches, to no elected board they had not themselves appointed.

Why it matters. Political influence arrived at exactly the point in the structure with the least accountability. That combination — maximum reach, minimum review — is the defining feature of this page.

2007–2011 — THE SENATE ASKS, AND CANNOT COMPEL

Senator Grassley's Finance Committee sought basic financial information from six media ministries. Several declined to provide it fully. The review closed in 2011 with no penalties and a suggestion that the sector self-regulate.

Why it matters. It was the most authoritative body that has ever asked, and it asked politely and went away. This is what the church exemption looks like in operation rather than in theory.

MAY 2022 — THE LIST EXISTED THE WHOLE TIME

Guidepost Solutions, the firm hired to investigate, reported that Southern Baptist executive staff had maintained a private list of accused ministers for years while publicly asserting that the convention's polity (its system of church government) made such a list impossible.

Why it matters. The impossibility was a claim, not a fact, and the claim was falsified by the institution's own filing cabinet. Nothing structural prevented it; a decision did.

Sources for this section: 1 2 12 13

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?

06 Branches & variants

BEFORE YOU READ

Protestant / Evangelical 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 the mainline churches (the older, historically established Protestant denominations: Lutheran, Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian and Reformed), Baptists, evangelicals, Pentecostal and charismatic churches, and non-denominational and independent networks. Pew's Protestant total includes Anglicans and Pentecostals, whom this codex also covers in their own volumes, so figures here overlap with those volumes.

BRANCH	EXAMPLE	WHERE AUTHORITY SITS
Mainline	Examples are the Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian and Reformed churches.	Authority sits with bishops or elected assemblies, usually under a published constitution with a church court.
Baptist	The Southern Baptist Convention had 12.3 million members in 2025, down from 16.3 million in 2006 [20] [21].	Each congregation is autonomous; an annual meeting of messengers (voting delegates sent by member churches) votes on the convention's business [7].

Pentecostal & Charismatic	Examples are the Assemblies of God, Hillsong and independent networks. Pentecostal and charismatic Christians numbered about 584 million worldwide in 2011 [19].	Authority often sits with a founder and a board the founder chose (see the Pentecostal & Charismatic volume).
Non-denominational and independent	Examples are megachurches and church-planting networks (networks that found new congregations) [12].	Authority sits with the founding pastor and the elders the pastor appointed, and no one sits above them [12].
Parachurch ministries (Christian organizations that work outside any church's structure)	Examples are apologetics (defense of the faith by argument), broadcast, publishing and relief organizations [1 13].	Authority sits with a board, often of the founder's choosing [1 13].

WHY THIS MATTERS TO YOU

If you know one community of Protestant / Evangelical 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	About 800 million adherents on Pew's 2011 count of 801 million Protestants, and up to 1 billion on wider definitions. Pew's 584 million Pentecostal and charismatic Christians span all traditions and are not a subset of that total [19]. ACADEMIC SOURCE · Pew, WCD
Regions	Its main regions are the United States, Brazil, Nigeria, China, South Korea, Kenya, Guatemala, the Philippines, the UK, Germany and Scandinavia.
Trend	Mainline decline in the West is steep, while non-denominational and Pentecostal growth is strong globally. In the United States, the growth of the religiously unaffiliated (the 'nones') draws heavily on this population.

Participation	Because membership is voluntary and self-reported, counts swing wildly; megachurch attendance figures are self-published and rarely audited. Deconstruction (re-examining, and often leaving, the beliefs one was raised in) and quiet disaffiliation are widely documented but hard to quantify. PATTERN OBSERVED

Authority

- Formal hierarchy is low, and charismatic authority is highly concentrated. The founder-pastor with 'vision,' an appointed board, and no bishop above him is the modern high-risk configuration.
- Celebrity pastors franchise authority through networks, conferences, and 'spiritual covering' relationships (in which a senior leader is said to give a pastor protection and oversight). PATTERN OBSERVED

The top of the chain

> The independent churches' proudest structural fact — no bishop — is also its accountability architecture: authority stops at a board the founder selected.

OFFICE	WHO SITS IN IT NOW	CHOSEN BY	REMOVABLE BY
The founder's chair	The founder or the founder's family holds it. Megachurch pulpits have passed to spouses and sons in several churches.	The founder chooses, with a board he selected.	The board he appointed can remove him, the arrangement the U.S. Senate's Grassley inquiry documented and could not penetrate.
The largest denomination's presidency (Southern Baptist Convention)	An annually elected president holds it, and the office genuinely rotates. The Guidepost report of 2022 showed what the permanent executive staff did with abuse reports between the elections.	Messengers elect the president by vote each June.	The next vote can remove the president, which is real accountability and rare in this codex.
The broadcast and worship-licensing empires	Family boards hold them; the Senate inquiry documented private aircraft and family-controlled boards at several of the prosperity ministries (section 19).	The boards choose themselves.	Only the boards themselves can remove their members.

> **THE TELL**
>
> Ask a member of an independent evangelical church who their bishop is and the answer is nobody — which is marketed as freedom. It also means the only appeal from the pastor is to the men who owe him their seats.

The board he appointed can remove him.

Who holds what

ENTITY	TYPE	HOLDER	HOLDS	WHY IT MATTERS TO YOU	RECEIPT
The six ministries examined by the Senate Finance Committee	Broadcast ministries	Named in the inquiry: Kenneth Copeland Ministries, Creflo Dollar Ministries, Benny Hinn Ministries, Bishop Eddie Long Ministries, Joyce Meyer Ministries, and Randy and Paula White	They hold aircraft, high-value parsonages, and boards controlled by founders' families.	This is what a working-class donor's seed offering purchased.	GOVERNMENT REPORT · U.S. Senate Finance Committee inquiry, 2007–2011

Megachurch music labels	Commercial	Church-owned publishing entities	They hold catalogs that generate royalties from congregations worldwide.	It covers every song your church sings on a Sunday.	FINANCIAL RECORD · CCLI licensing
Christian broadcast networks	Media	Corporate and family boards	They hold national platforms that convert audience fear into giving.	It is what your parents watch, and what it asks them for.	FINANCIAL RECORD / INVESTIGATIVE REPORT
Apostolic and church-planting networks	Franchise authority	Founding apostles and network overseers	They hold 'covering' relationships that confer deference without oversight.	It decides who your pastor answers to, which is often nobody.	PATTERN OBSERVED
The SBC Executive Committee's private list of accused ministers	Institutional record	Denominational staff and counsel	Names were maintained internally while a public registry was publicly opposed.	It shows whether the man teaching your children was already known.	INVESTIGATIVE REPORT · Guidepost Solutions report, 2022
Christian legal advocacy organizations	Political	Executive directors and litigation teams	They run legislative and courtroom campaigns domestically and abroad.	They shape laws affecting people who never attended your church.	INVESTIGATIVE REPORT

Sources for this section: 1 2 7 18 19

WHY THIS MATTERS TO YOU

"We have no hierarchy" sounds like freedom. The say-do table points out the catch: with nothing above the founder-pastor, he may hold more unchecked authority than any bishop in this book. The board that could remove him is often one he chose. If you attend a large independent church, can you name your board members? Do you know who appointed 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 exempt without applying and file no annual return [3]. In July 2025 the IRS agreed in a court filing that a church could endorse candidates to its own congregation; on 31 March 2026 a federal judge dismissed the case, holding that the court could not approve the deal [23] [24]	The one rule churches face on politics was nearly given up in a settlement, not by Congress [23] [24]
Australia	"Basic religious charities" are exempt from financial reporting [4]; a Royal Commission examined churches along with other institutions (2013–2017) [5]	Brian Houston was acquitted in 2023 of concealing his father's child sex offences [15]
England & Wales	Registered church charities file public accounts; smaller churches in several denominations (income of £100,000 or less) are excepted from registering until 31 March 2031 [34]. Serious incidents must be reported, and the Charity Commission can open statutory inquiries [6]	It is the closest thing to a regulator in this table that a member can use for free [6].

Who can compel an answer

State attorneys general and the IRS can compel an answer on financial matters, and civil courts on everything else. For Southern Baptist entities, the messengers' annual vote can as well; it is the rare internal body in this codex with demonstrated teeth.

WHY THIS MATTERS TO YOU

In the United States your church files no annual public return, so you cannot look it up the way you can look up a food bank. The law section also records that in 2025 the IRS agreed in a court filing that a church could endorse candidates to its own congregation, a deal a federal judge declined to approve in 2026. If your pulpit told you how to vote, would you know which rules it was operating under?

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

- Tithing is preached as a covenant obligation, and the prosperity gospel turns giving into an investment product, with seed-faith donations

promising divine returns. **LEADERSHIP STATEMENT** · recorded sermons of prosperity teachers

- The 2007–2011 U.S. Senate (Grassley) inquiry into six television ministries documented private jets, parsonage mansions, and family-controlled boards; most ministries declined full disclosure and the inquiry ended without penalties — itself a demonstration of the sector's opacity. **GOVERNMENT REPORT**
- Worship music is an industry: megachurch labels (Hillsong, Bethel, Elevation) earn licensing royalties every time congregations worldwide sing their catalog. **FINANCIAL RECORD** · CCLI licensing system

Follow the money

FLOW	STATED PURPOSE	HOW IT CONTROLS	WHO BENEFITS
Tithing taught as covenant obligation	The stated purpose is to fund the mission.	Blessing/curse framing (Malachi 3) makes giving a test of faith, and refusal reads as robbing God.	The church budget and senior staff compensation benefit.
Seed-faith and prosperity giving	Givers are told to sow in order to receive God's return.	It is sold as an investment product with no return and no accountability, and it is targeted at the poor.	Individual preachers and their broadcast operations benefit. **LEADERSHIP STATEMENT**
Building and vision campaigns	The stated purpose is growth and facilities.	Debt and pledges bind members, and a failed 'vision' is never audited.	The institution, the founder's legacy and vendors benefit.

Media, books, conferences, worship licensing	The stated purpose is resources and teaching.	The congregation is the guaranteed first market, and bulk-buying to manufacture bestsellers has been documented.	Founders personally, publishers and labels benefit. INVESTIGATIVE REPORT
Unpaid volunteer workforce	The stated purpose is serving the body (the church community).	Volunteers give full-time-equivalent labor with no wage, benefits, or equity while leaders are salaried.	The institution and its salaried staff benefit.

WHERE THE MONEY GOES, AND WHAT IT HOLDS

Tithing taught as covenant obligation

STATED PURPOSE
The stated purpose is to fund the mission.

HOW IT CONTROLS
Blessing/curse framing (Malachi 3) makes giving a test of faith, and refusal reads as robbing God.

→ The church budget and senior staff compensation benefit.

Seed-faith and prosperity giving

STATED PURPOSE
Givers are told to sow in order to receive God's return.

HOW IT CONTROLS
It is sold as an investment product with no return and no accountability, and it is targeted at the poor.

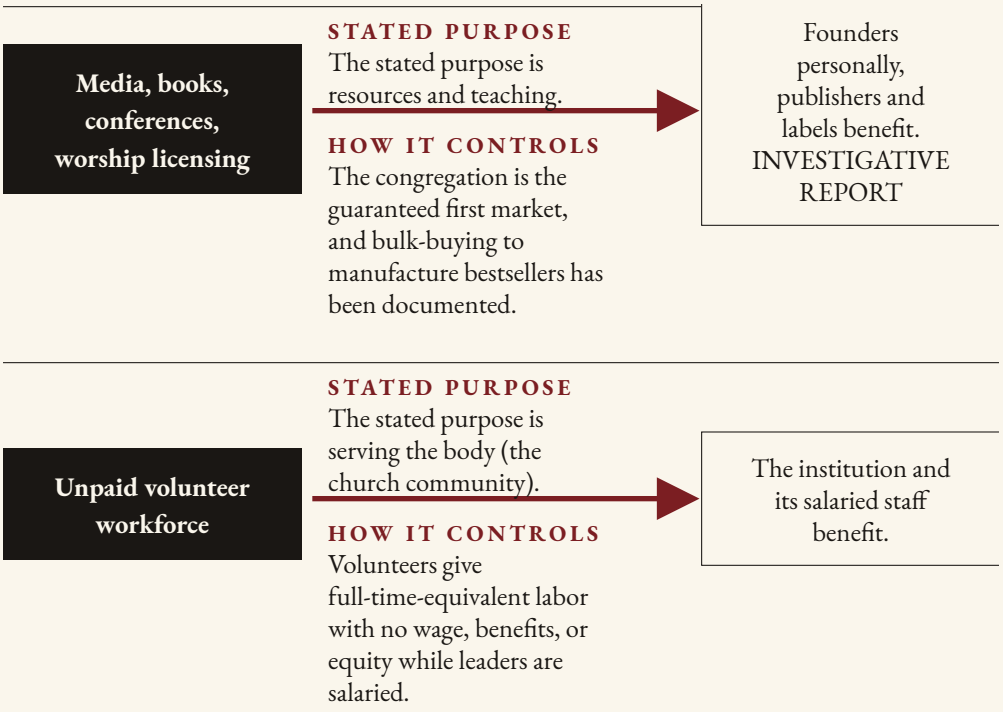
→ Individual preachers and their broadcast operations benefit. LEADERSHIP STATEMENT

Building and vision campaigns

STATED PURPOSE
The stated purpose is growth and facilities.

HOW IT CONTROLS
Debt and pledges bind members, and a failed 'vision' is never audited.

→ The institution, the founder's legacy and vendors benefit.



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

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 → Investment arm → Commercial subsidiaries and reserves

Disclosed. Only aggregate 'we use funds wisely' statements are disclosed.

Hidden. Portfolio size, compensation and holdings stay hidden.

WORSHIP LICENSING

Source. The money comes from congregations singing copyrighted material.

Path. Licensing clearinghouse → Label owned by the originating church → Founder's estate and publishing

Disclosed. Nothing is disclosed to the congregations paying.

Hidden. Royalty flows to individuals stay hidden.

AID TO POLICY LEVERAGE

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

Path. Faith-based development organization → Recipient government or community → Legislative and protocol influence

Disclosed. Program outcomes are disclosed.

Hidden. Conditions and advocacy spending stay hidden.

PUBLISHING AND MEDIA ARM

Source. The money comes from members buying required or recommended material.

Path. Institutional publisher → Author-leaders and their estates → Broadcast and conference circuit

Disclosed. Retail prices are disclosed.

Hidden. Royalties to serving leaders and bulk-purchase practices stay hidden.

LEGAL DEFENSE AND SETTLEMENT

Source. The money comes from general funds, which means member giving.

Path. Institutional counsel → Settlements and non-disclosure agreements → Reputational continuity

Disclosed. Settlement totals are occasionally disclosed under court order.

Hidden. That donations funded the defense stays hidden.

POLITICAL MOBILIZATION

Source. The resource is congregational trust and mailing lists.

Path. Advocacy or voter-guide operation → Party and donor infrastructure → Legislative outcomes

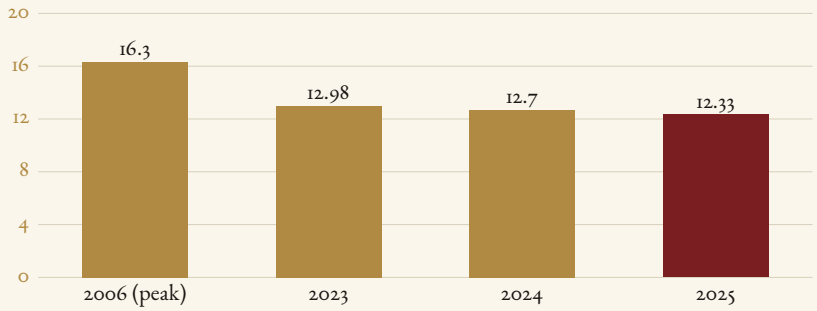
Disclosed. Issue positions are disclosed.

Hidden. Data sharing and coordination stay hidden.

Sources for this section: 1 2 18

Money in numbers

SOUTHERN BAPTIST CONVENTION MEMBERSHIP



million members — The figures come from the denomination's own Annual Church Profile (the yearly report its churches file), and 2025 was the 19th year of decline in a row. [21] [22] [20]

- **Giving to Southern Baptist churches, 2025:** Participating state conventions reported $9.64 billion in undesignated receipts (general giving not earmarked for a particular fund), though not every state convention collects giving data [20].
- **Missions:** Southern Baptist members and churches spent nearly $800 million on missions in 2023 [22].
- **Television ministries:** The Senate inquiry into six ministries (2007–2011) closed without penalties, and most of the six did not fully disclose [12].
- **Worship music:** Congregations pay license fees through CCLI (Christian Copyright Licensing International), which passes royalties to songwriters and publishers [18].

- **Money abroad:** Between 2007 and 2018, 28 US Christian-right groups spent at least $280 million outside the US [14].

WHY THIS MATTERS TO YOU

Here is a fact most churchgoers don't know: every time your congregation sings a worship song on Sunday, a license fee flows through CCLI to the songwriters and publishers, and many of the biggest catalogs belong to megachurch labels. Add tithes, building campaigns and, in prosperity teaching, "seed" giving that promises a return. The Senate's Grassley inquiry documented private jets and parsonage mansions, and most ministries declined to disclose fully. Before your next gift, ask to see the budget and the pastor's total pay. The answer is the assessment.

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?

PROSPERITY AND SEED-FAITH GIVING

Origin. 20th-century American revivalism fused New Thought abundance ideas with healing ministry and, from the 1950s, television. ACADEMIC SOURCE

What it was for. No part of it is older than about a century. This is not an ancient practice with a lapsed rationale — it was engineered as a fundraising mechanism from the start, using Malachi 3's blessing-and-curse framing on a mass audience.

Why that reason expired. It was never valid. An investment product that promises returns, keeps no accounts, and blames the buyer's faith when the return does not arrive would be prosecuted as fraud in any other sector.

Who benefits now. Named individuals with jets benefit, and so do the broadcast operations around them. The 2007–2011 Senate inquiry examined six ministries, documented the assets and family-controlled boards, and ended without penalties. GOVERNMENT REPORT

PURITY CULTURE

Origin. Purity culture was assembled in the 1990s from abstinence curricula, pledge campaigns, and courtship literature, which makes it roughly thirty years old. ACADEMIC SOURCE

What it was for. It was presented as a response to STIs (sexually transmitted infections) and teen pregnancy. Its actual function was to make adolescent sexuality a matter of community surveillance and female responsibility.

Why that reason expired. Outcome data did not support the abstinence-pledge model, and the movement's own leaders — including the author of its best-known book — have publicly repudiated it. The framework outlived its own architects' belief in it.

Who benefits now. The curriculum industry that sold it benefits, and so does the authority structure it created, a system in which adults question children about their sexual thoughts and call it accountability.

SPIRITUAL COVERING AND AUTHORITY LANGUAGE

Origin. It comes from the 1970s shepherding movement (in which each believer submitted to a personal 'shepherd') and later apostolic network models (networks of churches under a leader styled an apostle), so it is decades old, not millennia. ACADEMIC SOURCE

What it was for. It was sold as protection from deception for a movement with no hierarchy. In practice it manufactured hierarchy while denying it had one.

Why that reason expired. The shepherding movement collapsed publicly amid documented abuse of authority, and its own founders apologized. The vocabulary survived the movement that discredited it.

Who benefits now. Founder-pastors benefit, gaining the deference of a bishop with none of the oversight of one. 'Covering' means you may be corrected and may not correct.

THE UNACCOUNTABLE FOUNDER-PASTOR STRUCTURE

Origin. Reformation congregationalism, radicalized by American voluntarism and 20th-century church-growth strategy. ACADEMIC SOURCE

What it was for. Congregational independence was a genuine protest against distant hierarchies imposing clergy on unwilling communities. It was a check on power.

Why that reason expired. The reason was inverted completely. A church with a founder, a board he appointed, and no denomination above him has removed every check — the protest against unaccountable authority became the most unaccountable structure in modern Christianity. The collapses repeat with identical architecture: Mars Hill, Willow Creek, Hillsong, RZIM.

Who benefits now. The founder benefits personally, through compensation, book royalties from a captive market, real estate, and a platform that outlives any single scandal.

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

- 'Don't read the critics, read your Bible' functions as source restriction while sounding like piety; discernment blogs (sites that police teachers for doctrinal error) and approved-teacher lists channel information. PATTERN OBSERVED
- Non-disclosure agreements and severance conditions have been documented at multiple large churches and ministries, converting internal criticism into a legal risk [32]. INVESTIGATIVE REPORT
- 'Touch not the Lord's anointed' (a scriptural phrase used to shield leaders from criticism) and 'spirit of Jezebel/Absalom' labels (names of biblical rebels applied to a critic) convert accountability attempts into spiritual offenses. LEADERSHIP STATEMENT / PATTERN OBSERVED

Children

- Child dedication (a ceremony presenting an infant to God and the congregation), children's church, and altar calls (invitations to come forward at the end of a service and make a commitment) aimed at young children secure decisions before the capacity for informed consent.
- Purity pledges, abstinence curricula, and courtship rules place adolescent sexuality under adult community surveillance. ACADEMIC SOURCE

- Youth camps and mission trips produce peak emotional experiences deliberately timed to conversion decisions; homeschool networks in some circles restrict outside information entirely.
- Hell teaching for children, and in some circles corporal-punishment teaching sold as biblical parenting, have documented harms. INVESTIGATIVE REPORT

Bodies

- Complementarian statements (teaching that men and women have distinct roles, with church and family leadership reserved to men) bar women from preaching and eldership across large denominations and networks; where headship (a husband's authority over his wife) is taught, marital refusal has no doctrinal standing. OFFICIAL POLICY
- Purity culture's asymmetry is well documented: female modesty is framed as responsibility for male behavior. ACADEMIC SOURCE / FORMER MEMBER TESTIMONY
- Abuse is handled through pastor-counseled reconciliation instead of reporting, and independent investigations (e.g., the SBC's 2022 Guidepost report) found survivor allegations tracked and resisted rather than addressed. INVESTIGATIVE REPORT
- LGBTQ exclusion from membership and leadership is standard in conservative bodies; ex-gay ministries (programs that claimed to change sexual orientation) operated for decades before high-profile closures and apologies. INVESTIGATIVE REPORT

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

2	18	10
DOCUMENTED	TAUGHT	CULTURAL

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

STAGE 6 Extract	16 Flying Monkeys **TAUGHT**	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 **TAUGHT**
	24 Identity Erosion **TAUGHT**	25 Spiritual Bypassing **TAUGHT**	26 Financial Control **TAUGHT**	
STAGE 7 Discard	27 Manufactured Crisis **TAUGHT**	28 Discard **CULTURAL**		
STAGE 8 Replace	29 Replacement **CULTURAL**	30 Plausible Deniability **CULTURAL**		

Rest in grace and you are lukewarm; strive and you are reminded works save no one.

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.

There are parking volunteers, coffee, lights, a band, and within a week a stranger crying with you at the altar. You are assigned a small group, then a serving team, then a membership class. The intimacy is manufactured fast and on purpose.

What it asks of you: Within a month you had confessed things to people whose last names you didn't know. Ask what that access was for.

1 · Love Bombing

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

How it shows here

- The newcomer is greeted by parking volunteers, coffee teams, worship music, emotional sermons, altar calls, small group invitations, and instant "family" language.
- Evangelical spaces often specialize in rapid intimacy: strangers ask about your trauma, your marriage, your sins, your "walk with God," and your prayer requests within days.
- The system creates an emotional high through worship, lights, music, collective singing, and public vulnerability — then interprets that high as the Holy Spirit confirming the church's message.

The strongest defense. People are just excited to see someone come to Jesus.

The counter. Excitement is not the issue. The issue is emotional acceleration before informed consent. If a person is pushed to confess, convert, join, serve, tithe, or submit while flooded with music, tears, applause, and belonging, that is not just welcome. That is pressure disguised as revival.

> EVIDENCE GRADE
>
> CULTURAL Assimilation pipelines are church-growth practice, copied between congregations and mandated by nobody.

2 · Weaponized Generosity

Giving help that installs unspoken obligation.

How it shows here

- Evangelical churches often offer free childcare, youth groups, counseling, coffee, meals, recovery programs, men's groups, women's groups, worship nights, and emotional crisis support.
- The newcomer receives not just help but instant assignment: join a small group, serve on a team, attend membership class, give testimony, tithe, volunteer, invite others.
- A church may help someone through addiction, divorce, unemployment, or grief, then later treat disagreement as betrayal: "We walked with you through your darkest season."
- Volunteer-heavy churches often turn gratitude into labor. The person who was helped becomes the person expected to help set up chairs, lead youth, sing on the worship team, host small group, or give money.

The strongest defense. Healthy churches build community. People serve because they want to give back.

The counter. Giving back is beautiful when it is voluntary. It becomes extraction when gratitude is converted into obligation. If a person cannot say no without being called selfish, lukewarm, rebellious, or spiritually immature, then the church did not create community. It created a debt economy with worship music.

> EVIDENCE GRADE
>
> CULTURAL Free help (childcare, counseling, recovery programs) and the later expectation to serve are congregational practice; no denomination sets a rule for either.

Stage 2 · Hook

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

Revival, breakthrough, your best life, God's promises over your household and prophetic words about your calling are never measured and always deferred. And when you drift: a text from the pastor, we miss you, God isn't finished with you.

What it asks of you: Count the prophecies spoken over you that had a date. Now count the ones that came true. Then ask why the second number is never discussed.

3 · Future Faking

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

How it shows here

- Evangelicalism often sells a personalized future: God has a plan for your life, a spouse prepared for you, a ministry calling, a breakthrough, a season of favor, a restored family, a revival, a destiny.

- Altar calls and conferences create immediate emotional certainty about future transformation: your addiction will break, your depression will lift, your marriage will heal, your children will come back, your purpose will be revealed.
- Prosperity-adjacent versions promise harvest after seed: give money now, expect blessing later. If the blessing fails to appear, the believer is told to examine faith, obedience, hidden sin, or timing.
- Purity culture future-fakes marriage: stay sexually pure now and God will reward you with a beautiful covenant marriage later. When the marriage is painful, sex is traumatic, or no spouse appears, the system rarely refunds the lost years.
- Revival culture future-fakes national transformation: one more prayer meeting, one more fast, one more election, one more youth movement, one more prophetic word, and the nation will turn back to God.

The strongest defense. Christians believe God really does have plans, callings, and promises. Encouraging faith is not deception.

The counter. Encouragement becomes manipulation when leaders make emotionally specific promises they cannot verify. "God has someone for you," "your breakthrough is coming," "this seed will release blessing," and "revival is about to happen" keep people invested in systems that fail repeatedly. When failure is always blamed on the believer and never on the promise-maker, the future is fake by design.

> EVIDENCE GRADE
>
> TAUGHT Prosperity and seed-faith promises are taught from platform and broadcast.

4 · Hoovering

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

How it shows here

- The hoover often begins softly: "We just miss your face," "You're still family," "No pressure, but we saved you a seat."
- Then it turns theological: "Don't let church hurt separate you from God," "The enemy wants you isolated," "You're in a dangerous season."
- Former volunteers are often pulled through usefulness: "The youth miss you," "The worship team isn't the same," "You have a calling," "God gave you gifts for the body."
- Evangelical leaders may turn your exit into a testimony-in-waiting: "This is a wilderness season. God will bring you back stronger."
- If you left over leadership abuse, they may say, "No church is perfect," converting accountability into a maturity test.

The strongest defense. Evangelicals genuinely believe community is essential and isolation is spiritually harmful.

The counter. Community is not the same as captivity. If the solution to harm caused by the church is always "come back to church," then the institution is prescribing the injury as the cure.

> EVIDENCE GRADE
>
> TAUGHT The warnings used to call a leaver back (the enemy wants you isolated, a wilderness season, gifts owed to the body) are taught from the pulpit; the follow-up contact itself is congregational practice.

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.

Tithe, then tithe cheerfully. Serve, then serve without recognition. You are lukewarm, unsubmitted, not all in. The vision is always bigger and your contribution is always the gap.

What it asks of you: You have never been told you are doing enough. There is a reason the standard is a moving target.

5 · Devaluation

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

How it shows here

- Evangelicalism often devalues through the language of being lost, broken, dead in sin, rebellious, backslidden, lukewarm, worldly, impure, or outside God's will.
- Testimony culture rewards self-denigration: "I was nothing," "I was filthy," "I was lost," "I destroyed everything," "Only Jesus made me worth anything."

- Purity culture teaches especially women and girls that their bodies can make men stumble, that sexual history damages value, and that modesty is proof of spiritual seriousness.
- Calvinist forms intensify this with total depravity: the teaching that "you cannot even choose good without God choosing you first" can function as devaluation.
- Worship lyrics and sermons often rehearse unworthiness until the believer feels guilty for having self-respect outside grace.

The strongest defense. Evangelicals are emphasizing grace. The point is that God loves people despite sin.

The counter. Grace that first requires psychological collapse is not merely grace. If the system has to convince people they are worthless so that its rescue feels beautiful, then salvation is being staged like an emotional hostage release.

> EVIDENCE GRADE
>
> TAUGHT Total depravity and unworthiness are preached doctrine; how hard they are pressed is a matter of preaching style.

6 · Gaslighting

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

How it shows here

- A member says, "The pastor manipulated me," and leaders answer, "Touch not the Lord's anointed," "You have a critical spirit," or "You are causing division."

- A woman says purity culture damaged her, and the church says, "You misunderstood biblical modesty."
- A gay or trans person says the teaching made them hate themselves, and the response is, "That is conviction, not shame."
- A doubter says, "The Bible seems contradictory," and the answer becomes, "You just don't want to submit to God."
- Emotional worship experiences are used as proof: "You felt the Spirit. You know this is true." Later, if the person reinterprets that experience, they are told they are hardening their heart.

The strongest defense. Churches have to distinguish genuine conviction from worldly rebellion.

The counter. That distinction becomes abuse when the church always gets to define which is which. If pain means conviction, disagreement means rebellion, and leaving means deception, the system has made itself unfalsifiable.

> EVIDENCE GRADE
>
> TAUGHT The replies used to reinterpret a member's experience ('touch not the Lord's anointed', 'a critical spirit', 'conviction, not shame') are taught from the pulpit and in counsel; no written rule directs them.

7 · Double Bind

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

How it shows here

- Evangelicals are told salvation is by grace alone, not works — yet their standing is continuously measured by attendance, tithing, serving, witnessing, and 'fruit.' Rest in grace and you are lukewarm; strive and you are reminded works save no one.
- Members must be 'authentic and vulnerable' in small group — and what is shared becomes prayer-chain (a network that passes prayer requests among members) information and leadership leverage. Withhold and you are guarded; share and you are exposed.
- Questioning the pastor's 'vision' is quenching the Spirit; following your own leading is deception. The Spirit, somehow, only ever speaks through the platform.

The strongest defense. We preach grace; discipleship simply produces visible fruit.

The counter. If grace is free but belonging is billed weekly in visible performance, the system runs on works while advertising grace. The bind is the business model: the anxiety it creates is resolved only by more participation.

> EVIDENCE GRADE
>
> TAUGHT Both halves of the bind are taught: salvation by grace alone, and standing measured by attendance, giving, serving and 'fruit'. How the two are combined is congregational practice.

Stage 4 · Confuse

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

Ask about the budget and you have a spirit of division. Ask about the allegation and you are touching the anointed. Departing staff sign severance conditioned on silence, then are described from the platform as having left in sin.

What it asks of you: The NDA is not a spiritual practice. Ask why a church needs one.

8 · Intermittent Reinforcement

Unpredictable reward that creates addictive emotional dependency.

How it shows here

- Production-grade worship delivers a reliable Sunday high that is never quite reliable — and the weeks it fails, the message is 'come expectant,' 'press in,' 'get your heart right.' Attendance becomes a lever pressed for a jackpot God.

- Platform access — worship team, leadership pipeline, the pastor's circle — is granted, revoked, and re-dangled without stated criteria; volunteers double their hours to decode it.
- Prophecy culture pays out intermittently by design: the words that land are testimonies forever; the misses are timing, faith, or your blockage. The hit rate never has to improve, because the near-misses keep the room.

The strongest defense. We can't manufacture the Holy Spirit; some services simply carry more anointing.

The counter. Fog machines, key changes, and build-drop set lists are manufacturing — skillful, budgeted, rehearsed. The honest question is not whether God moves, but why the system takes credit for the peaks and assigns you the valleys.

> EVIDENCE GRADE
>
> CULTURAL Production-grade worship, unstated criteria for platform access, and the reading of prophetic hits and misses are congregational practice; no governing document sets them.

9 · Moving the Goalposts

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

How it shows here

- Salvation is preached as a free gift. Then the believer must prove it through quiet time (daily private prayer and Bible reading), purity, church attendance, doctrinal correctness, evangelism, giving, serving, emotional worship, and public testimony.

- Purity culture says, "Save sex for marriage." Then marriage comes and the person is told they must now be sexually available, emotionally healed, submissive, fruitful, modest, and grateful.
- Someone raises concerns about church abuse. Leaders first demand evidence. Evidence appears. Then they demand tone. Tone improves. Then they demand process. Process is followed. Then they say the person's heart is wrong.

The strongest defense. True faith produces fruit; leaders are discerning spiritual maturity.

The counter. Discernment becomes goalpost-moving when the evidence is never enough because the institution can always inspect your motives. Once motives become the final battlefield, no one can ever satisfy the court.

> EVIDENCE GRADE
>
> CULTURAL Escalating expectations of giving and service are cultural rather than codified, which is what makes them deniable.

10 · Strategic Ambiguity

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

How it shows here

- Evangelical churches say "relationship, not religion," but build detailed expectations around attendance, giving, purity, doctrine, politics, gender, and service.

- Leaders say membership is voluntary, but leaving is framed as drifting, rebellion, offense, or spiritual danger.
- "Biblical leadership" is vague enough to mean servant leadership in public and authoritarian control in private.

The strongest defense. Churches need flexibility because every person's spiritual situation is different.

The counter. Flexibility becomes strategic ambiguity when leaders refuse definitions until definitions would limit them. If no one can say where pastoral care ends and control begins, the ambiguity is not accidental.

> EVIDENCE GRADE
>
> CULTURAL The undefined terms described here ('relationship, not religion', voluntary membership, 'biblical leadership') are congregational vocabulary; no governing document defines them.

11 · Projection

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

How it shows here

- Evangelical churches accuse leavers of being offended, rebellious, or wanting to sin, while refusing to examine manipulation, purity shame, authoritarian leadership, or cover-ups.
- Leaders call critics divisive after their own secrecy fractured trust.
- Purity culture accuses women of making men stumble, projecting male responsibility onto female bodies.

- Prosperity or revival preachers blame failed promises on the believer's lack of faith, projecting the failure of the system onto the follower.

The strongest defense. Churches must correct sin and protect biblical truth.

The counter. Correction becomes projection when it only travels downward. If pastors can diagnose everyone else's sin but cannot name their own exploitation, "biblical correction" is just accusation with a microphone.

> EVIDENCE GRADE
>
> CULTURAL Accusing leavers and critics of offense and division, and blaming failed promises on the believer's faith, is observed practice; no governing document directs it.

12 · DARVO

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

How it shows here

- A church member reports manipulation, financial secrecy, sexual misconduct, abusive counseling, or authoritarian leadership. Leaders deny wrongdoing, then accuse the member of gossip, slander, bitterness, or rebellion.
- A pastor caught in misconduct may be framed as "under attack" because of his anointing or influence.
- The victim is pressured to forgive quickly, while the leader receives public sympathy, restoration language, and protective prayer.

- If the person leaves, the church says, "They were offended," "They wanted to sin," or "They could not submit to authority."
- Abuse exposure becomes "division," while cover-up becomes "protecting the church."

The strongest defense. Church discipline requires care, confidentiality, and avoiding gossip.

The counter. Confidentiality protects victims. Secrecy protects institutions. If "do not gossip" means "do not warn people," then the church has made silence sound biblical.

> EVIDENCE GRADE
>
> **DOCUMENTED** The Southern Baptist Convention's 2022 independent report found survivor allegations tracked and resisted. *(sourced)*

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

- Emotional manipulation becomes normal through worship music, altar calls, dim lighting, repeated choruses, public tears, and sermons that intensify vulnerability before asking for commitment.
- Purity culture desensitizes young people to sexual surveillance: accountability questions, modesty checks, pornography confessions, dating rules, and shame around desire.

- Members become used to pastors speaking with divine certainty: "God told me," "the Lord put this on my heart," "this is a word for someone."
- Repeated volunteer pressure makes burnout feel holy. People stop asking why a church with paid leaders runs on unpaid exhaustion.

The strongest defense. Evangelical churches encourage passionate worship, holiness, accountability, and service.

The counter. Passion is not the issue. The issue is conditioning. If people are repeatedly placed in emotionally heightened environments and then asked to surrender, confess, give, serve, or obey, their consent is being softened through ritualized intensity.

> EVIDENCE GRADE
>
> CULTURAL Worship conditioning, claims of divine certainty and volunteer burnout are congregational practice that no body sets and none has reformed. The repudiation of purity culture by its own authors and the closing of ex-gay ministries (section 20) bear only on the purity bullet.

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.

The church holds your friends, your childcare, your kids' school, sometimes your paycheck. Critics are 'discernment blogs,' therapy is 'worldly wisdom,' former members are bitter. The only place to process a doubt about the church is inside the church.

What it asks of you: Write down everyone you'd still have coffee with in a year if you left tomorrow. Look at the list.

14 · Isolation

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

How it shows here

- Evangelical churches isolate through small groups, purity culture, Christian schooling, homeschooling, youth groups, accountability partners, Christian media ecosystems, and warnings about “worldly” influence.

- Young people may be told not to date unbelievers, not to consume secular music or entertainment, not to trust secular universities, and not to build intimate friendships with people who could weaken their faith.
- Deconstruction is treated as contagion. People questioning faith are warned not to listen to exvangelicals (former evangelicals), progressive Christians, atheists, LGBTQ-affirming theologians, or "bitter" former members.
- The church may say it is not isolating you because you still go to work or school — but emotionally, spiritually, sexually, intellectually, and socially, it narrows your trusted world to approved believers.

The strongest defense. Evangelicals are building strong Christian community and protecting believers from harmful ideologies.

The counter. Community becomes isolation when outside perspectives are treated as infection. If members are safe only when surrounded by church-approved people, church-approved books, church-approved politics, and church-approved relationships, then the community is not strengthening faith. It is reducing oxygen.

> EVIDENCE GRADE
>
> TAUGHT Warnings against critics, secular therapy, and former members are taught continuously; the NDA practice is separately documented.

15 · Triangulation

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

How it shows here

- Evangelical churches triangulate through small groups, accountability partners, pastors, spouses, ministry teams, prayer chains, and "concerned friends."
- If you question leadership, suddenly several people want coffee with you. Each meeting feels personal, but the message is coordinated: forgive, stop gossiping, trust leadership, don't divide the church.
- Marriage is commonly used: "Your wife needs you to lead spiritually," "Your husband is concerned," "Your children need to see you in church."
- Volunteer roles become triangulation: "The youth look up to you," "The worship team needs you," "The church family misses your gifts."
- Evangelicalism triangulates with "the world": if you leave, you are warned that secular friends, liberal media, sexual temptation, bitterness, or deconstruction communities will pull you away from God.
- It triangulates through testimonies: former doubters are showcased as proof that "faithful people come back."

The strongest defense. Healthy churches use community to care for people who are struggling.

The counter. Care listens. Triangulation coordinates. If multiple people approach you with the same spiritual script and none of them can tolerate the possibility that the church is wrong, then the community is not caring for you. It is managing you.

EVIDENCE GRADE

TAUGHT Coordinated counsel from small groups, spouses, accountability partners and ministry teams is taught as care and carried out at congregational discretion; no written 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.

Withholding the tithe is framed as robbing God. Seed-faith giving is sold as an investment. Building pledges run for years. Volunteers work full-time-equivalent hours with no wage. Your small-group leader informs leadership about your doubts. Departing staff sign non-disclosure agreements. Ask about the budget and you become a spirit of division.

What it asks of you: A church that requires legal silence from the people who leave has told you exactly what it believes about its own conduct.

16 · Flying Monkeys

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

How it shows here

- After someone leaves an evangelical church, former friends, ministry teammates, worship leaders, youth pastors, and small-group members begin "checking in."
- The person who reports abuse is approached by people saying: "You're hurting the church," "You need to forgive," "Have you gone through the proper process?" "This is gossip."
- If a pastor is criticized, loyal members defend him publicly and privately: "He has done so much good," "You don't know the whole story," "Touch not the Lord's anointed."
- Prayer chains become surveillance networks: private pain is reframed as a "prayer concern" and circulated.

The strongest defense. Church members naturally care when someone is struggling or hurt.

The counter. Caring people ask what happened. FLYING MONKEYS ask why you are not over it yet. If the entire concern network protects leadership more than the harmed person, the love is being routed through loyalty.

> EVIDENCE GRADE
>
> TAUGHT Members pressing a critic or survivor to forgive, stop 'gossiping' and protect the pastor repeat taught phrases ('touch not the Lord's anointed'); the pressure itself is congregational practice with no written rule.

17 · Smear Campaign

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

How it shows here

- Former members are described as offended, deconstructing, worldly, progressive, deceived, rebellious, or wanting sexual freedom.
- Abuse survivors may be accused of exaggerating, gossiping, refusing forgiveness, or attacking a man of God.
- Churches may imply that the person left because they did not want accountability.
- Leaders may tell staff, volunteers, or small-group leaders a sanitized version of events to make the dissenter look unstable.

The strongest defense. Church leaders must warn against false teaching, gossip, and spiritual danger.

The counter. Warning becomes SMEAR CAMPAIGN when it shifts attention from evidence to character. If the institution cannot answer the claim, it attacks the claimant.

> EVIDENCE GRADE
>
> TAUGHT Warnings against critics and former members are taught from the pulpit. The Mars Hill, Hillsong and RZIM case entries (section 19) do not record a smear of a named person, so the technique is not graded on them.

18 · Silent Treatment / Stonewalling

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

How it shows here

- A church says it has handled a complaint "biblically," but refuses to disclose what happened, who investigated, what consequences occurred, or whether victims are safe.
- Leaders ask the harmed person to meet privately, then use the private meeting to pressure forgiveness without changing anything.
- Emails go unanswered. Requests for financial transparency are ignored. Abuse concerns are redirected to elders loyal to the pastor.
- The church keeps worship services upbeat while victims wait in silence.

The strongest defense. Churches must avoid gossip and protect privacy.

The counter. Privacy is not the same as secrecy. If the only people protected by silence are leaders, then "biblical process" has become a curtain over institutional cowardice.

> EVIDENCE GRADE
>
> **DOCUMENTED** Non-disclosure agreements imposed on departing staff at Mars Hill, Harvest Bible Chapel, Hillsong, Willow Creek, Acts 29 and RZIM, among others [32]. *(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

- Altar calls manufacture consent through music, dim lighting, emotional sermons, group pressure, public invitation, and fear of eternal consequences.
- "Membership covenants" (written agreements setting out a member's obligations) are signed in communities where leaving later is framed as unfaithfulness or spiritual danger.
- Volunteers "choose" to serve after repeated messages that real Christians sacrifice, use their gifts, and do not consume without contributing.
- Youth purity pledges are made before young people can understand adult sexuality, marriage, trauma, consent, or long-term consequences.

The strongest defense. Evangelical churches invite people to respond freely to God.

The counter. Emotional intensity plus eternal stakes plus public pressure is not a neutral invitation. If the environment is engineered to make refusal feel like rejecting God, then consent has been manufactured with worship music.

> EVIDENCE GRADE
>
> TAUGHT The appeals that shape these choices (altar calls, membership covenants, calls to serve, purity pledges) are taught and staged from the platform; the choices are then presented as free.

20 · Trauma Bonding

The wound and the bandage come from the same hand.

How it shows here

- Evangelical spaces alternate intense fear and intense comfort: hell, demons, purity shame, end-times panic — then worship highs, altar prayer, small-group affection, and "God loves you."
- Youth camps can create emotional whiplash: sermons about sin and damnation followed by music, tears, hugs, and public salvation moments.
- Purity culture shames sexuality, then offers restoration through accountability, confession, marriage, or "redeemed" identity.
- A church hurts someone, then surrounds them with prayer and emotional warmth if they agree not to leave.

The strongest defense. Evangelicals preach both sin and grace because both are central to the gospel.

The counter. Sin and grace become TRAUMA BONDING when terror is used to intensify dependence on the institution's comfort. If the church creates the emotional crisis and then interprets the relief as proof of truth, it has engineered attachment.

> EVIDENCE GRADE
>
> TAUGHT The alternation of fear (hell, demons, purity shame, end-times) and comfort (worship, altar prayer, 'God loves you') is preached and staged in services and camps; no written rule directs it.

21 · Learned Helplessness

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

How it shows here

- A believer prays for healing, breakthrough, marriage, purity, or deliverance. When nothing changes, they are told to pray harder, have more faith, repent more deeply, or wait on God.
- Church volunteers burn out, ask for relief, and are told the harvest is plentiful but workers are few.
- Abuse reports disappear into elder meetings, private processes, and forgiveness language.
- The person learns that effort does not produce change; it only produces another demand.

The strongest defense. Faith requires patience and perseverance.

The counter. Patience becomes LEARNED HELPLESSNESS when it is demanded only from the harmed while leaders remain unaccountable. If nothing changes except the victim's tolerance, perseverance has become captivity.

> EVIDENCE GRADE
>
> TAUGHT The counsel to pray harder, repent more deeply and wait on God, and to take abuse reports to the elders, 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

- Evangelical churches often frame control as accountability: porn accountability, dating accountability, purity accountability, giving accountability, leadership accountability.
- Small groups may monitor members' emotional lives, marriages, doubts, habits, and "walk with God."
- Pastors may say they are protecting the flock from false teaching when discouraging members from reading critics or former members.
- Youth ministries may control sexuality, friendships, media, clothing, and dating under the banner of "guarding purity."

The strongest defense. Accountability helps believers grow and avoid destructive choices.

The counter. Accountability becomes BENEVOLENT CONTROL when it flows upward as confession and downward as surveillance. If the member is transparent but leadership is opaque, the system is not mutual care. It is spiritual monitoring.

> EVIDENCE GRADE
>
> TAUGHT Accountability for dating, purity, pornography and giving is taught as discipleship and run through small groups and youth ministries; it is written into almost no governing document.

23 · Infantilization

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

How it shows here

- Adults are told to seek pastoral covering, submit to male headship, obey elders, join accountability groups, and avoid independent interpretation.
- Women may be treated as spiritually equal but practically managed through complementarian roles.
- Youth-group logic follows adults into adulthood: purity rules, accountability questions, emotional dependence on leaders.
- Doubters are called baby Christians, backsliders, or spiritually immature.

The strongest defense. Spiritual maturity requires accountability and discipleship.

The counter. Accountability becomes INFANTILIZATION when it prevents autonomy. If maturity always means agreeing with leadership, and disagreement proves immaturity, adulthood has been rigged.

> EVIDENCE GRADE
>
> TAUGHT Submission to male headship and to elders is taught, and some large denominations write complementarian roles into policy (section 11). Treating adults as dependants is congregational practice with no written rule.

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

- Evangelical identity can become total: quiet time, purity, testimony, church attendance, spiritual gifts, mission, calling, accountability, worship style, politics, dating, marriage, and parenting.
- "God has a plan for your life" can erase the person's own plan.
- Purity culture erodes sexual identity by making the body a public moral object.
- Testimony culture rewards people for narrating their lives as "before Jesus I was broken; after Jesus I am useful."
- The person's emotions are sorted into spiritual categories: peace means God approves, anxiety means lack of trust, desire means flesh, doubt means attack.

The strongest defense. Evangelical faith helps people find purpose and transformation.

The counter. Purpose becomes IDENTITY EROSION when every part of the person must be converted into ministry material. If your trauma becomes testimony, your body becomes purity evidence, your labor becomes calling, and your doubt becomes enemy attack, the institution has colonized the self.

> EVIDENCE GRADE
>
> TAUGHT The replacement identities (testimony, calling, purity, spiritual categories for emotions) are taught in preaching and discipleship; 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

- Trauma is bypassed into testimony: “God allowed this so you can help others.”
- Abuse is bypassed through “forgive,” “pray for them,” “don’t gossip,” and “no church is perfect.”
- Depression or anxiety may be spiritualized as lack of faith, demonic attack, or insufficient prayer.
- Racism, sexism, homophobia, and abuse may be bypassed through “the gospel is the answer” without structural change.
- Worship highs can create temporary relief that substitutes for repair.

The strongest defense. Evangelicals believe God redeems pain and transforms lives.

The counter. Redemption becomes SPIRITUAL BYPASSING when transformation is demanded from the victim while the system avoids change. If the wound becomes a sermon before it becomes evidence, the church is using spirituality to escape accountability.

> EVIDENCE GRADE
>
> TAUGHT The phrases used to meet harm with forgiveness and hope ('forgive', 'no church is perfect', 'God allowed this so you can help others') 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

- Evangelical churches may push tithing, offerings, missions pledges, church plants, conferences, youth camps, books, merch, and paid leadership training.
- Members may be told that failing to tithe robs God, blocks blessing, reveals distrust, or shows a consumer attitude.
- Churches may depend on unpaid volunteer labor while leaders receive salaries, housing allowances, speaking fees, book deals, or platform benefits.
- Financial transparency may be limited while members are expected to give sacrificially.

The strongest defense. Churches need money and volunteers to serve people and spread the gospel.

The counter. Mission becomes FINANCIAL CONTROL when the institution demands sacrifice from members but hides its own finances. If transparency flows upward as giving but not downward as accountability, the offering plate is also a power structure.

> EVIDENCE GRADE
>
> TAUGHT Tithing is taught as a covenant obligation with blessing-and-curse framing from the platform.

Stage 7 · Discard

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

You are named from the pulpit, or described precisely enough not to need naming. You are called divisive, bitter, in rebellion. Friends stop replying — not because they were instructed to, but because the story arrived before you did.

What it asks of you: You have believed one of these stories about someone else. Consider that yours is being told right now, in the same voice.

27 · Manufactured Crisis

Creating urgency to suppress critical thinking and generate loyalty.

How it shows here

- Evangelical spaces may manufacture crisis through revival urgency, altar-call pressure, rapture anxiety, anti-LGBTQ panic, persecution narratives, demonic attack, and "lost generation" rhetoric.
- Youth are told that one night, one prayer, one choice, one sexual mistake, or one doubt could alter eternity.

- Fundraising often uses urgency: "We must act now," "souls are at stake," "this building will reach the city."
- Leadership scandals become crises of division rather than crises of accountability.

The strongest defense. Evangelicals believe eternal stakes are real and urgent.

The counter. Urgency becomes MANUFACTURED CRISIS when it is used to override consent, evidence, and time. If people are asked to give, confess, convert, vote, or obey while emotionally flooded, urgency has become a manipulation tool.

> EVIDENCE GRADE
>
> TAUGHT Crisis is preached from the platform: revival urgency, rapture anxiety, persecution narratives and fundraising deadlines are repeated in sermons and appeals. No governing body sets them.

28 · Discard

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

How it shows here

- Someone is praised as called, gifted, anointed, or "on fire" until they burn out or question leadership.
- A worship leader, youth worker, small-group host, or ministry volunteer may be removed overnight after expressing doubt or naming abuse.

- Churches may say, "They left because they were offended," turning discard into a spiritual diagnosis.
- Former members become sermon illustrations: people who drifted, compromised, deconstructed, or chose the world.

The strongest defense. Leaders must protect the flock from confusion and false teaching.

The counter. Protection becomes DISCARD when the flock is protected from the truth-teller. If someone's years of service disappear the moment they become inconvenient, the church did not love them. It loved their usefulness.

> EVIDENCE GRADE
>
> CULTURAL Removal is congregational and discretionary; independent polity means there is no appeal and no external standard.

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.

Your seat, your team slot, and your row are filled within weeks, and your leaving becomes a sermon illustration about bitterness. The rules were never leadership's: this is what the Bible says, take it up with God.

What it asks of you: Nobody who says take it up with God has ever handed you God's phone number. They have, however, handed you a giving envelope.

29 · Replacement

Your seat is filled before the door closes behind you.

How it shows here

- A burned-out worship leader is replaced by a younger singer with more enthusiasm.
- A staff member who questions leadership is replaced by someone more loyal and less informed.
- A family leaves over abuse; the church highlights new baptisms and growth statistics.
- A deconstructing member becomes a warning while a new convert becomes proof God is moving.

The strongest defense. Churches should celebrate new life and continue ministry.

The counter. Celebration becomes REPLACEMENT when new growth is used to bury old harm. If the church points to new members to avoid answering former members, revival has become a distraction from wreckage.

> EVIDENCE GRADE
>
> CULTURAL Filling a departed member's roles and pointing to new growth 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 church says membership is voluntary, but membership covenants, small groups, accountability structures, and leadership culture make exit feel like rebellion.
- Pastors preach against "gossip" and "division" after abuse allegations, then deny they were referring to the survivor.
- Purity culture is framed as biblical wisdom, but when adults describe sexual trauma from it, leaders say, "You misunderstood purity."
- Churches say giving is voluntary, then preach that not tithing robs God or reveals distrust.
- Leaders say they are not political, then use sermons, voter guides, culture-war language, and "biblical values" to guide political behavior without officially endorsing candidates.

The strongest defense. Churches teach principles; people apply them freely. Accountability is healthy discipleship. No church is perfect.

The counter. Teaching "principles" becomes PLAUSIBLE DENIABILITY when every member knows the expected application but leadership denies commanding it. Accountability is not healthy when members confess upward while leadership remains opaque. "No church is perfect" is not a defense against patterned harm. It is a slogan used to lower expectations.

EVIDENCE GRADE

CULTURAL Authority is attributed to Scripture by leaders answerable to boards they appointed, and the pressure described here is informal by design, so no body can be held to it.

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

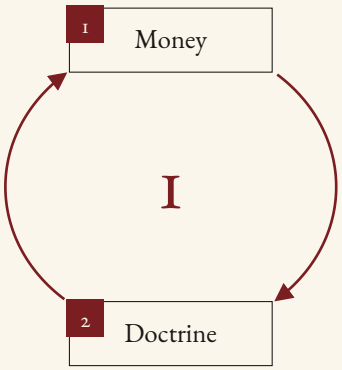
The loops

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 framed as robbing God if withheld, it is interpreted by the man whose compensation it sets, and it funds the conference circuit that teaches it.

How it runs.

1. Tithing is taught as a covenant obligation, with Malachi 3's blessing-and-curse framing, so that withholding reads as robbing God (section 9; technique 26).
2. The teaching is preached by a pastor whose compensation is set by a board he appointed (sections 7 and 16).
3. Members give, and prosperity teaching adds seed-faith gifts that promise a divine return (section 9).

4. The money pays senior staff, building campaigns, and the media, book and conference operations that carry the same teaching (section 9, Follow the money).

5. The congregation is the guaranteed first market for those books and conferences, and the teaching returns to the pulpit (section 9).

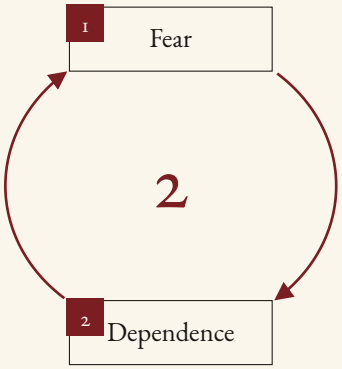
Techniques that feed it. 26 · Financial Control, 3 · Future Faking, 9 · Moving the Goalposts, 30 · Plausible Deniability.

Why it closes. The pastor who teaches the obligation is paid from it, and the board that sets his pay is one he chose (section 7). In the United States a church files no annual return (section 8), so a giver cannot see how much of the tithe returns to the teacher. When the promised blessing fails to appear, the believer is told to examine faith, obedience, hidden sin or timing (technique 3), so the failure never reaches the teaching.

Where it could be broken, and by whom. It weakens wherever the books are opened: plural elders, outside audits and published salaries (section 4). In England and Wales a church that is a registered charity files public accounts (section 8). A member can ask for the budget, the pastor's salary and the housing allowance before giving (section 23, question 1). This paragraph is analysis, not a documented finding.

An example from this page. The Senate inquiry into six television ministries documented private aircraft, high-value parsonages and boards controlled by the founders' families; most of the ministries declined full disclosure, and the inquiry closed without penalties (section 19).

2 · Fear to Dependence to Fear



Hell and rapture anxiety are installed at camp, relief is supplied at the altar, and the altar is inside the building.

How it runs.

1. Hell teaching reaches children, and youth camps produce peak emotional experiences timed to conversion decisions (section 11).
2. The fear is kept live through rapture anxiety, demonic attack, and the warning that one night, one choice or one doubt could alter eternity (technique 27).
3. Relief comes at the altar through music, tears, hugs and public salvation moments (technique 20), and the emotional high is read as the Holy Spirit confirming the church's message (technique 1).
4. The high does not last. In the weeks worship fails to deliver, the message is 'come expectant' and 'get your heart right' (technique 8).
5. The next fear sends the member back to the same altar, inside the same building (techniques 20 and 21).

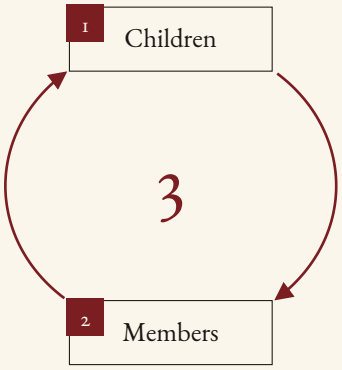
Techniques that feed it. 27 · Manufactured Crisis, 20 · Trauma Bonding, 8 · Intermittent Reinforcement, 5 · Devaluation.

Why it closes. The church that names the danger also runs the room where relief is offered, and it interprets the relief as proof that the teaching is true (technique 20). A failed Sunday is assigned to the worshipper, never to the service (technique 8).

Where it could be broken, and by whom. It weakens where the call to commit is separated from the emotional peak. Section 18 names worship leaders as the tier that could refuse to place the appeal at that peak. It also weakens when a member finds relief outside the building that supplied the fear. This paragraph is analysis, not a documented finding.

An example from this page. Technique 20 describes youth camps where sermons on sin and damnation are followed by music, tears, hugs and public salvation moments.

3 · Children to Members to Children



Youth programs, Christian schools, and homeschool curricula produce adults whose only framework is the institution's.

How it runs.

1. Child dedication, children's church and altar calls aimed at young children secure decisions before the capacity for informed consent (section 11; technique 19).
2. Purity pledges, abstinence curricula and courtship rules place adolescent sexuality under adult surveillance (section 11; technique 22).
3. Youth camps and mission trips time peak emotional experiences to conversion decisions, and homeschool networks in some circles restrict outside information entirely (section 11; technique 14).
4. By adulthood the church supplies friends, childcare, school, a small group and often employment, so leaving costs a total social world (sections 3 and 15).
5. Adults formed this way raise their own children inside the same programs, and the cycle begins again.

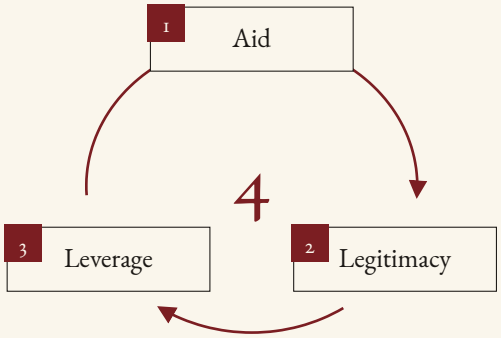
Techniques that feed it. 19 · Manufactured Consent, 13 · Normalization / Desensitization, 14 · Isolation, 22 · Benevolent Control.

Why it closes. Each stage arrives before the person can weigh it, and by adulthood the institution supplies the framework used to judge the institution. No one has to decide to continue the loop; it continues unless someone decides to stop it.

Where it could be broken, and by whom. It weakens where decisions wait for consent and children hear outside voices. Parents decide enrolment, and section 18 names Christian school teachers as able to refuse to teach a curriculum they know to be false. The authors who repudiated purity culture (section 20) show the curriculum can be withdrawn from inside. This paragraph is analysis, not a documented finding.

An example from this page. Section 17 records the deconstruction generation, who absorbed purity culture and hell teaching as children and process them as adults, often at the cost of family estrangement.

4 · Aid to Legitimacy to Leverage to Aid



Relief and mission work buy standing, standing sustains the exemption and political access, and that access protects the exemption.

How it runs.

1. Congregations fund relief, mission and development work, and short-term mission trips move billions in aggregate (section 16).
2. Faith-based development organizations carry donor and public-grant money to recipient governments and communities (section 9, Aid to policy leverage).
3. The standing becomes leverage abroad: 28 US Christian-right groups spent at least $280 million outside the US between 2007 and 2018, on campaigns framed as pro-family aid (sections 9 and 16).
4. At home, congregational trust is organized into voter guides, donor lists and turnout operations (section 16), as the Moral Majority first did in 1979 (section 5).
5. The exemption holds. US churches are exempt without applying and file no annual return, and in 2025 the IRS agreed in a court filing that a church could endorse candidates to its own congregation

(section 8).

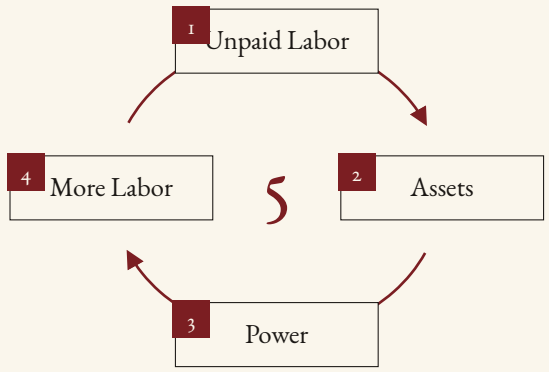
Techniques that feed it. 2 · Weaponized Generosity, 30 · Plausible Deniability, 27 · Manufactured Crisis, 26 · Financial Control.

Why it closes. The aid earns the standing, the standing secures the exemption and the access, and neither the conditions attached to aid nor the advocacy spending has to be disclosed (section 9, Aid to policy leverage).

Where it could be broken, and by whom. It weakens where courts and legislators, not settlements, decide the terms of the exemption: in March 2026 a federal judge dismissed the case in which the IRS had agreed to let churches endorse candidates (section 8). It also weakens under a disclosure statute; the United Kingdom card in section 22 names that as the variable. This paragraph is analysis, not a documented finding.

An example from this page. Section 16 records American evangelical money funding campaigns abroad against LGBTQ rights and reproductive access: "Recipients get resources; recipient countries get laws their citizens never debated."

5 · Unpaid Labor to Assets to Power to More Labor



Volunteers build the campus, the corporation holds it, and the asset base underwrites the next vision.

How it runs.

1. Volunteers give full-time-equivalent labor with no wage, benefits or equity while leaders are salaried (section 9; technique 26).
2. Gratitude for help received is turned into service: setting up chairs, leading youth, singing on the worship team, hosting small groups (technique 2).
3. Building and vision campaigns bind members through debt and pledges, and the assets are titled to the institution (sections 9 and 16).
4. A failed vision is never audited (section 9), and the next campaign asks for more pledges and more hours.
5. Burnout is made to feel holy, and volunteers who ask for relief are told the harvest is plentiful but the workers are few (techniques 13 and 21).

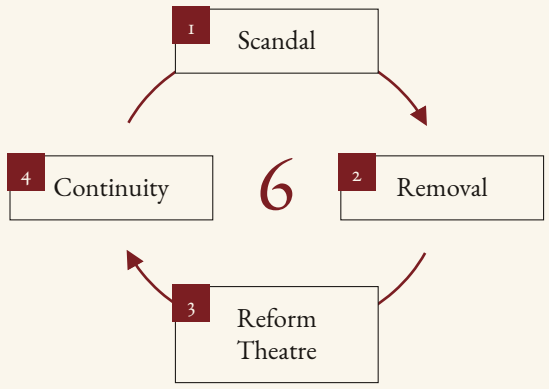
Techniques that feed it. 2 · Weaponized Generosity, 26 · Financial Control, 13 · Normalization / Desensitization, 21 · Learned Helplessness, 29 · Replacement.

Why it closes. The people who give the labor hold no stake in what it builds. Section 16 lists volunteers "whose unpaid labor funded assets titled to the institution" among those who pay, and a volunteer who burns out is replaced (technique 29).

Where it could be broken, and by whom. It weakens when someone asks what the money built and is answered. Section 18 names elders and deacons as able to refuse to approve a budget line they cannot explain, and to say so publicly. This paragraph is analysis, not a documented finding.

An example from this page. In section 2, Marcus asks his small group whether anyone knows what the building fund is actually at. Tyler says he will ask, and knows he will not.

6 · Scandal to Removal to Reform Theatre to Continuity



The founder falls, the church rebrands or closes, the network platforms him again, and the model is copied by the next church plant (a newly founded congregation).

How it runs.

1. A founder-pastor holds authority with a board he appointed and no one above him (sections 6 and 7).
2. Misconduct comes to light through outside investigations and reporting rather than through the board, as at Mars Hill, RZIM and Hillsong (section 19).
3. The founder resigns or the church dissolves. Mars Hill dissolved in 2014, and the RZIM finding came only after the founder's death (section 19).
4. A restoration process, administered by the leader's own peers on a timeline nobody outside chose, can return him to ministry (section 14, Words used here).
5. The architecture stays in place and recurs: founder, hand-picked board, no external accountability (sections 3 and 10).

Techniques that feed it. 18 · Silent Treatment / Stonewalling, 30 · Plausible Deniability, 25 · Spiritual Bypassing, 29 · Replacement, 17 · Smear Campaign.

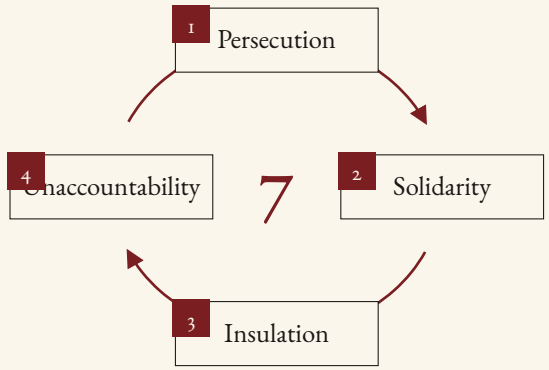
Why it closes. Removing the person meets the demand for action. The structure that allowed the case, a founder with a board he chose and no one above either, survives the case and is copied.

Where it could be broken, and by whom. Section 20 names one change: releasing departing staff from their non-disclosure agreements. Outside the church, the Charity Commission in England and Wales can open statutory inquiries and remove trustees (section 22); inside it, the Southern

Baptist messengers' annual vote has shown it can act (section 8). This paragraph is analysis, not a documented finding.

An example from this page. Mars Hill Church in Seattle, with about 15 locations, dissolved after its founding pastor resigned, and its structure gave no body above the founder the power to act sooner (section 19).

7 · Persecution to Solidarity to Insulation to Unaccountability



Genuine cultural hostility toward evangelicals is cited to convert a question about the budget into an attack on Jesus.

How it runs.

1. Persecution narratives and culture-war panic are preached as spiritual danger (technique 27).
2. A question is recast as division. Ask about the budget and you have a spirit of division; ask about the allegation and you are touching the anointed (section 12, stage 4).
3. The person asking is labeled divisive, bitter or in rebellion, often from the platform (technique 17; section 15).
4. Members close ranks. Loyal members defend the pastor, and several people ask the questioner for coffee with the same message: forgive, stop gossiping, trust leadership (techniques 15 and 16).
5. The question goes unanswered, and "We are financially accountable" stands beside a Senate inquiry that most of the ministries it examined declined to answer in full (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 the question comes from inside. Section 3 notes that much of the reporting that exposed the pattern came from the evangelical press itself, and section 23 closes on the tradition's own principle, the priesthood of all believers, as a warrant to examine the books. This paragraph is analysis, not a documented finding.

An example from this page. The Guidepost report found that the Southern Baptist Executive Committee had treated survivors as adversaries and liabilities while it kept a private list of accused ministers (section 19).

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?

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 financially accountable.	Most of the ministries examined by a Senate inquiry declined to provide full disclosure, and the inquiry ended without penalties.	GOVERNMENT REPORT
We would never silence a victim.	Departing staff at several large churches, among them Mars Hill, Harvest Bible Chapel, Hillsong and Willow Creek, signed non-disclosure agreements covering leadership conduct [32].	INVESTIGATIVE REPORT
We have no hierarchy — every believer is a priest.	Founder-pastors hold more unchecked authority than any bishop in this codex, precisely because there is no hierarchy above them.	PATTERN OBSERVED

There is no registry because of legal risk.	A list of accused ministers was maintained privately while the registry was opposed publicly.	INVESTIGATIVE REPORT

Accountability or theatre?

Last time the chair ran. There were four major collapses in a decade. Three founders resigned and one had died before the findings. This page records no change in network-level governance.

Who holds the chair now. Founder-pastors and network apostles hold it, with appointed boards and no external audit.

Prediction. The next fall will be revealed by a podcast, the church will dissolve into a new corporate name, and the model will be taught at a leadership conference within a year.

Words used here

TERM	WHAT IT MEANS INSIDE	WHAT IT DOES	SAID PLAINLY
Touch not the Lord's anointed	It is a scriptural phrase used to shield leaders from criticism.	It is the single most cited verse in this volume, deployed almost exclusively when a leader is under scrutiny and almost never at any other time.	'Do not examine the pastor.'

Church discipline	It is the formal process for addressing a member's sin.	It frequently arrives at the member raising a concern rather than at the conduct the concern was about, which reverses the direction of accountability entirely.	'You raised something and now you are the subject.'
Restoration process	It is a program that returns a fallen leader to ministry.	It is almost always applied to leaders and almost never to members, and it is typically administered by the leader's own peers on a timeline nobody outside chose.	'He will be back, and the people he harmed do not have a vote on when.'
Divisive	It means causing disunity in the body.	It is a serious charge in congregational polity, applicable to anyone who raises anything in public, and effectively unanswerable.	'You said it where others could hear.'

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 the total social world megachurches deliberately build (groups, childcare, schools, employment).
- Departing staff and members are publicly smeared as 'divisive,' 'bitter,' or 'under attack.' **PATTERN OBSERVED / FORMER MEMBER TESTIMONY**

The ledger of exit

COST	DOCUMENTED?	DETAIL	THE OFFICIAL DENIAL
Total social world	Yes	The church supplied friends, childcare, school, a small group, and often employment.	“They're free to go anywhere.”
Reputation	Frequently	Departing staff and members are labeled divisive, bitter, or 'in sin' from the platform.	“We shared only what the congregation needed to know.”
Employment and NDAs	Documented	Staff leave with severance conditioned on silence [32].	“Standard HR practice.”
Spiritual threat	Common	Leavers are warned about backsliding, apostasy, losing covering, or eternal consequence.	“It's love, not manipulation.”

How the cost is denied

CHANNEL	LEVEL	NOTE
Explicit policy	Medium	Membership covenants and doctrinal statements are written; money and discipline practice often is not.

Informal enforcement	High	Access to platform, leadership, and belonging is the currency, and none of it is documented.
Leadership distance	High	Independent polity means no bishop, no denomination, and no one to appeal to.
Doctrinal ambiguity	High	'Covering,' 'submission,' 'vision,' and 'unity' are defined by whoever is in charge.
Cultural outsourcing	High	Harm is attributed to one bad pastor or to regional culture, never to structure.
Volunteer enforcement	High	Small-group leaders and lay elders enforce; senior leadership stays clean.
Sacred secrecy	Medium	Elder-board confidentiality and NDAs both function as sacred secrecy with legal teeth.
Exit cost denial	High	'The door is unlocked' is said by institutions that built every relationship the person has.

WHY THIS MATTERS TO YOU

Megachurches deliberately build a total social world: small groups, childcare, school and often your job. That is what makes them good to belong to, and what makes them expensive to leave. Departing staff and members are sometimes labeled "divisive" or "bitter". If you left tomorrow, which of your friendships would survive? Try naming them.

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

- Founder-pastors and their families benefit through compensation set by hand-picked boards, housing allowances (the part of a US minister's pay that is exempt from income tax), book deals sold to captive congregations, and speaking circuits. Documented collapses (Mars Hill, Hillsong, Willow Creek, RZIM) repeatedly reveal the same architecture. INVESTIGATIVE REPORT
- Christian broadcasting and publishing conglomerates benefit, and their revenue depends on keeping audiences afraid, mobilized, and giving. INVESTIGATIVE REPORT
- Political operatives benefit by renting evangelical trust through voter-guide operations, donor-list harvesting, and policy shops that convert pulpit access into power. INVESTIGATIVE REPORT

Money out, leverage back

- American evangelical money funds legislative and legal campaigns abroad against LGBTQ rights and reproductive access, routed through local partners and framed as pro-family aid. Recipients get resources; recipient countries get laws their citizens never debated.
  INVESTIGATIVE REPORT · openDemocracy, 2020
- Worship music is a global licensing economy: every congregation that sings a megachurch's catalog pays royalties through the CCLI system. Your church's Sunday morning is another church's revenue line.
  FINANCIAL RECORD
- Congregational trust is harvested for political operations — voter guides, donor lists, and turnout infrastructure built on pulpit access. Your attendance becomes an asset in a market you never entered.
  INVESTIGATIVE REPORT
- Short-term mission trips move billions in aggregate and are widely criticized in development literature for serving the participants' formation more than the recipients' needs — help structured around the giver. **ACADEMIC SOURCE**

Who pays

- Poor and working-class members pay, targeted by prosperity teaching.

- Women in complementarian churches pay, and so do abuse survivors routed into reconciliation.
- LGBTQ members and youth pay, including those subjected to conversion practices (attempts to change sexual orientation or gender identity).
- Church staff pay, because their employment, housing, and reference letters depended on silence.
- Volunteers pay, because their unpaid labor funded assets titled to the institution.
- Children raised in purity culture and hell teaching pay, and they are now the core of the deconstruction generation.

Sources for this section: [12] [13] [14]

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
Poor and elderly donors	Prosperity and seed-faith teaching is aimed hardest at those with least.	Many give on fixed incomes, via broadcast, with no local relationship to appeal to.
Women in complementarian churches	They are excluded from teaching and eldership, and abuse is routed to reconciliation.	It is worse where the counseling pastor is a friend of the accused.

LGBTQ youth	They face exclusion and, in past decades, conversion practices.	They face it as minors in households that agree with the exclusion.
Church staff	Their employment, housing, and references are contingent on silence.	They have no transferable credentials outside ministry.
The deconstruction generation	They absorbed purity culture and hell teaching as children and process them as adults.	Saying so out loud can bring family estrangement.

From The LGBTQ+ Codex

- *Where traditions reversed* — Multiple mainline Protestant denominations, liberal Jewish movements, and Unitarian and Quaker bodies have ordained and married LGBTQ members following votes of their own governing bodies.

From The Children's Codex

- *Reporting, and the internal-first rule* — The Guidepost report on the Southern Baptist Convention (2022) found that executive staff maintained a private list of accused ministers for years while the convention publicly asserted its polity made such a list impossible. The impossibility was a claim; the filing cabinet falsified it.

WHY THIS MATTERS TO YOU

The first row of the table is the one to sit with: poor and elderly donors, targeted hardest by prosperity and seed-faith teaching, often through broadcast, with no local relationship to appeal to. Do you have a parent or grandparent who gives to a television ministry? Have you ever talked with them about where the money goes?

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 founder and the board, by people who see decisions without making them. Small-group leaders, worship leaders, staff, elders and deacons, and Christian school teachers 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 leaders	Hold the actual pastoral relationships and the flow of information upward	Every doubt, every marital crisis, every departure before leadership does	Report concerns	Convert a confidence into a report
Worship leaders and creative staff	Produce the emotional architecture of the service	How deliberately the arc is engineered	Build to the giving moment	Place the appeal at the emotional peak
Church staff and administrators	Run the operation on modest salaries	The compensation gap, the discretionary account, the NDA in their own severance	Sign the NDA	Sign a non-disclosure agreement covering conduct rather than commercial information
Elders and deacons	Formally hold authority they were appointed to by the person they oversee	That unanimity is expected before the meeting starts	Present a united front	Approve a budget line they cannot explain, and say so publicly
Christian school teachers	Educate the next cohort	Which conduct clauses are enforced and against whom	Model the standard	Teach a curriculum they know to be factually false

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.

Guidepost report on the Southern Baptist Convention

WHEN: 2022

WHAT: An independent investigation commissioned under pressure from member churches found that the denomination's Executive Committee had maintained a

private list of accused ministers while publicly resisting a registry, and had treated survivors as adversaries and liabilities.

RECORD: Guidepost Solutions report, commissioned by the SBC

OUTCOME: The Executive Committee released its list of accused ministers. Messengers voted in 2022 for a public database; none was ever published, and in 2025 the Executive Committee shelved it, citing legal risk. The list had existed for years without being acted upon.

TACTICS: 12 · DARVO, 17 · Smear Campaign, 18 · Silent Treatment / Stonewalling

GRADE: DOCUMENTED

Senate inquiry into six television ministries

WHEN: 2007–2011

WHAT: A U.S. Senate Finance Committee inquiry examined six large broadcast ministries, documenting private aircraft, high-value parsonages, and boards controlled by the founders' families. Most declined to provide full financial disclosure.

RECORD: Senate Finance Committee inquiry (government inquiry)

OUTCOME: The inquiry concluded without penalties or legislation. The inquiry's principal finding was the sector's opacity — and that opacity remains lawful.

TACTICS: 3 · Future Faking, 18 · Silent Treatment / Stonewalling, 26 · Financial Control

GRADE: DOCUMENTED

A megachurch with no one above the founder (United States, 2014)

WHEN: 2014

WHAT: Mars Hill Church in Seattle, with about 15 locations, dissolved after its founding pastor resigned amid findings about his leadership [12].

RECORD: *Christianity Today*, *The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill* [12]

OUTCOME: The church closed; its structure gave no body above the founder the power to act sooner [12].

TACTICS: 28 · Discard, 29 · Replacement, 23 · Infantilization

GRADE: DOCUMENTED

The apologist's ministry investigates its founder (United States, 2021)

WHEN: 2021

WHAT: An investigation commissioned by Ravi Zacharias International Ministries found that its late founder had sexually abused massage therapists over years [13].

RECORD: Miller & Martin report, February 2021 [13]

OUTCOME: The finding came only after the founder's death [13].

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

GRADE: DOCUMENTED

The founder, the father and the court (Australia, 2021–2023)

WHEN: 2021–2023

WHAT: Hillsong founder Brian Houston was charged with concealing his father's child sex offences. He resigned from Hillsong in March 2022 and was found not guilty in August 2023 [15].

RECORD: ABC News (Australia), 17 August 2023 [15]

OUTCOME: Houston was acquitted. He had already stepped down; the verdict did not restore him [15].

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

GRADE: DOCUMENTED

Willow Creek: the elder board and the founder (United States, 2018–2019)

WHEN: 2018–2019

WHAT: Bill Hybels, founding pastor of Willow Creek Community Church near Chicago, resigned in April 2018 after former staff accused him of a pattern of sexually inappropriate words and actions. Willow Creek and Hybels first rebutted the claims. An Independent Advisory Group the church appointed reported in February 2019 that the allegations were credible and faulted the elder board [35].

RECORD: Willow Creek Independent Advisory Group report, February 2019 [35]

OUTCOME: The founder had already left; the finding that his accusers were credible came ten months later, from a panel the church chose [35].

TACTICS: 18 · Silent Treatment / Stonewalling

GRADE: DOCUMENTED

Sources for this section: 1 2 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 15 33 35

WHY THIS MATTERS TO YOU

These are not hypotheticals. Six 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?

The finding came only after the founder's death.

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
The SBC's Guidepost report was published in full, and the Executive Committee's list of accused ministers was released.	Survivors and member churches forced the motion.	2022	Advocates faced years of denominational resistance and personal attacks.
Purity culture was repudiated by its own principal authors.	The authors did it themselves, publicly.	2016–2019	Not recorded on this page.
Major ex-gay ministries closed with a public apology.	Former leaders of those ministries closed them.	2013	Exodus International closed [16].

Promises on the record

COMMITMENT	MADE	STATUS	NOTE
Southern Baptist Convention — a database of credibly accused ministers	2022, following the Guidepost report	Abandoned	Messengers voted for the "Ministry Check" database in 2022. No name was ever published; in February 2025 the Executive Committee said it was no longer a focus, citing legal hurdles. In August 2026 survivors launched their own national database, ProtestantAccountability.org, with more than 2,700 people accused of committing or covering up church abuse listed at launch [11].

What would change this page

Public, retroactive release of departing staff from their non-disclosure agreements at the movement's flagship churches would revise the concealment findings — and would cost nothing but the concealment.

Sources for this section: 9 10 11 16 17

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

- **Christa Brown.** A survivor and retired lawyer, she wrote to 18 Baptist leaders in four states in 2004–05 to warn them about the youth minister who had abused her, and none of them offered help [25].
- **The survivors who built their own database.** In 2026, after the Southern Baptist database was shelved, survivors led by Chellee Taylor launched ProtestantAccountability.org in August 2026, a searchable national database of more than 2,700 people accused of committing or covering up church abuse [10] [11].
- **Alan Chambers.** As president of Exodus International, an ex-gay ministry, he apologized to gay people and shut the ministry down in 2013 [16].
- **Joshua Harris.** The author of *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, the best-known book of purity culture (section 10), he discontinued his own bestseller in 2018 [17].

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 single apex. Polity is congregational and independent, and the SBC president is elected annually while the executive staff are not.

LAW: Churches file no Form 990 (the annual public return other US charities must file). State attorneys general have jurisdiction over charitable assets. Many states exempt clergy from mandatory reporting.

DOCUMENTED: The Guidepost report (2022) examined the SBC. The Grassley Senate inquiry (2007–2011) closed without full disclosure. Megachurch NDA controversies have recurred [32].

EXIT: Exit costs are low socially in most of the country, and high where the church is also the school, employer, and social world, which is common in the South and Midwest.

REGULATOR: Complaints go to state attorneys general, and to the IRS for affiliated entities that do file. The SBC messenger vote is a genuine internal lever.

TELL: The country with the largest evangelical population has among the weakest religious financial disclosure in the developed world. Those two facts are related.

United Kingdom

APEX: Authority sits in denominational structures and independent churches. Most are charities, though smaller churches in several denominations are excepted from registration until 2031 [34].

LAW: The Charity Commission requires annual accounts, publishes trustee names, and can open statutory inquiries and remove trustees. Serious incident reporting is mandatory.

DOCUMENTED: The Commission has opened statutory inquiries into churches over safeguarding and financial management, and has removed trustees.

EXIT: Exit costs are generally low, and higher in tightly-knit immigrant and diaspora congregations.

REGULATOR: The Charity Commission is the most reader-usable regulator in this entire volume. It is free and searchable, and it acts.

TELL: The theology and the practices are the same, and the accounts are published. The variable is a disclosure statute.

Australia

APEX: Authority sits with denominational bodies and independent megachurches, notably in the Hillsong network.

LAW: Churches register with the ACNC (the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission), though churches that qualify as "basic religious charities" are exempt from financial reporting. The Royal Commission (2013–2017) covered institutions across denominations. Mandatory reporting varies by state.

DOCUMENTED: The record includes Royal Commission case studies, the Hillsong disclosures, and Brian Houston's 2022 resignation, followed by a 2023 acquittal on the criminal charge.

EXIT: Exit costs are low socially, and higher for those employed in church-linked enterprises.

REGULATOR: The ACNC oversees finances and governance. State child-protection authorities and state police are the other routes.

TELL: Australia produced the most thorough statutory examination of institutional child abuse anywhere. Its findings are usable by readers in every other jurisdiction.

Sources for this section: 3 4 5 6 15

WHY THIS MATTERS TO YOU

This page covers the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia. 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 won't your church publish its budget, your pastor's salary, and its housing allowance — on the website, this week?

WHY THIS IS ASKED

Publishing three numbers (the budget, the salary and the housing allowance) costs a church nothing if it has nothing to hide. The question sets a deadline ("this week") so that the answer cannot become a promise.

EXAMPLE ALREADY ON THIS PAGE

The money section records that most of the six ministries in the Senate's Grassley inquiry (2007–2011) declined full disclosure, and that the inquiry ended without penalties.

QUESTION 2 OF 6

Why does a church that preaches truth-telling require departing staff to sign non-disclosure agreements?

WHY THIS IS ASKED

A non-disclosure agreement turns an employee's memory of leadership conduct into a legal risk. The question asks why a church that preaches truth-telling needs one.

EXAMPLE ALREADY ON THIS PAGE

The say-do table sets "We would never silence a victim" beside the record: departing staff at multiple large churches signed non-disclosure agreements covering leadership conduct.

QUESTION 3 OF 6

The last time a leader was accused, who conducted the investigation, who paid them, and did the report get published in full or summarized by the people it examined?

WHY THIS IS ASKED

Who ran an investigation, who paid for it, and whether it was published in full together decide whether it was an investigation or a public-relations exercise. The question asks for all three.

EXAMPLE ALREADY ON THIS PAGE

The cases section includes the Guidepost report on the Southern Baptist Convention and an apologist's ministry investigating its own founder (2021). In both, the findings came from a firm the institution hired.

QUESTION 4 OF 6

If the door is unlocked, why does everyone who walks through it lose every friend they had?

WHY THIS IS ASKED

"The door is unlocked" is literally true, since no one is held against their will. The question asks what the room on the other side of the door looks like.

EXAMPLE ALREADY ON THIS PAGE

The cost section's ledger lists the loss of a "total social world" as documented, set beside the official denial: "They're free to go anywhere."

QUESTION 5 OF 6

Prosperity teaching says giving produces return. Ask for the data. Then ask why the only reliably enriched party is the person teaching it.

WHY THIS IS ASKED

Prosperity teaching makes an empirical claim: giving produces a return. Empirical claims can be tested. The question asks for the data, and for who reliably profits from the claim.

EXAMPLE ALREADY ON THIS PAGE

The money section describes seed-faith donations framed as "an investment product" promising divine returns. The Grassley inquiry documented the teachers' private jets and parsonages.

QUESTION 6 OF 6

You were told doubt is dangerous and criticism is divisive. Ask who is protected by those two rules, and notice it is never you.

WHY THIS IS ASKED

Rules against doubt and "divisiveness" sound like they protect unity. The question asks you to notice whom they actually protect, and that it is never the person asking the question.

EXAMPLE ALREADY ON THIS PAGE

The reach section records that "touch not the Lord's anointed" and "spirit of Jezebel/Absalom" labels turn attempts at accountability into spiritual offenses. The say-do section calls "touch not the Lord's anointed" a verse deployed almost exclusively when a leader is under scrutiny.

In closing

Your tradition's founding claim is the priesthood of all believers — that you can read, interpret, and stand before God without a middleman. Take that seriously and the conclusion is unavoidable: you do not need permission to examine your church's books, its process, or its pastor. That is not rebellion against Protestant principle. It is Protestant principle.

The people who exposed Mars Hill, Hillsong, and the SBC's own abuse records were not atheists. They were believers who refused to let loyalty to an institution stand in for loyalty to God. You are allowed to be one of them. You may find it is the most evangelical thing you ever do.

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.

Practical guidance, not legal advice.

1. **Leaving is legally free.** The costs are social, family and sometimes economic, where the church is also the school, employer or social world.

2. **If you signed a non-disclosure agreement as staff,** it generally cannot stop you reporting a crime to police; take the agreement to a lawyer.
3. **Membership covenants.** Some churches ask members to sign one; you can resign membership in writing.
4. **If you were abused,** go to the police or child-protection services first, not the church.
5. **Find support** that is not run by a church [26] [27] [28].

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	FOR	WHERE	CONTACT
Recovering from Religion	People questioning or leaving faith	US, Canada and online	**(844) 368-2848** [26]
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) [27]
SNAP	Survivors of clergy abuse, across churches	US and international	Via website [28]
ICSA	Former members of high-control groups; families	International	Via website [29]
Childhelp	Child abuse	US	**1-800-422-4453** [30]

RAINN	Sexual assault	US	**1-800-656-4673** [31]

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.

WHAT CHANGED ON THIS PAGE

- **2026-10-03:** Corrected the size figures, the count of sourced techniques and four technique grades; named the churches behind the non-disclosure claim and cited a source; added the 2019 Houston Chronicle exposure of Southern Baptist abuse, the Willow Creek case, the UK rule for small churches and the name of the survivors' database; removed claims the sources did not support.
- **2026-09-27:** Added Branches, Law & state, Money in numbers (Southern Baptist membership), three more documented cases, Voices from inside, 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.