

What to Do When Churches Claim Absolute Authority

A clear, calm way to tell
if your church is following Christ ... or not

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Introduction

A Calm, Clear Way to See What's Really Going On and Move Forward with Wisdom and Peace

You're not here because you want to rebel. You're here because something at church doesn't feel right—and you don't want to ignore it anymore.

This handbook is designed to help you move slowly, see clearly, and make grounded decisions without fear. It preserves your voice, honors your questions, and keeps Jesus at the center.

As you read, you'll find prompts that invite reflection rather than reaction, and questions that help you discern whether a church culture reflects the heart and way of Jesus.

Maybe you've felt:

- Confused in church instead of at peace
- Pressured instead of guided
- Afraid to ask honest questions

And now you're quietly asking: "Is it me—or is something here not like Jesus?" If that's how you feel, you are not alone. Many sincere believers reach a point where loyalty to Jesus requires thoughtful evaluation of the structures and leaders who claim to represent him.

Healthy discipleship welcomes this process; unhealthy systems fear it.

"Is it me—or is something here not like Jesus?"

Let's start here:

- ☞ You are not broken
- ☞ You are not the problem for asking questions

You may just need a clearer way to see what's really happening. That begins with naming what you're perceiving, distinguishing between guidance and control, and remembering that spiritual authority is meant to serve, not dominate.

Throughout this handbook, you'll slow down, evaluate, and measure everything against the character of Jesus—his humility, truth, mercy, courage, and love.

The Two Choices That Aren't Actually Your Only Options

Most people believe they only have two choices when things go wrong at church: submit completely or leave completely.

But spiritually healthy Christians don't rush into either. They do something wiser. They slow down. They evaluate. They measure everything against the character of Jesus.

Between "blind submission" and "total departure" lives a wise middle path: patient discernment. This path involves clarifying language, seeking godly counsel, testing fruits over time, and refusing to make fear-based decisions. Your dignity and agency matter to God; your questions do not threaten Him.

How to Use This Handbook

Don't rush. You're not trying to win an argument. You're not trying to prove something. You're simply asking: "Does this reflect Jesus?"

Use each section slowly. Journal your thoughts. Pray honestly. If you find yourself anxious, pause, breathe, and return when you can listen without fear. The Holy Spirit is not hurried, and love makes room for genuine inquiry.

Section 1: Authority — What Are They Claiming?

Before you answer, take a breath. Authority in the way of Jesus is marked by service, transparency, and humility. Unhealthy authority tends to centralize control, resist accountability, and weaponize Scripture.

Use the questions below to discern which pattern you're observing over time, not just in moments that look impressive or inspiring.

- Does this church act like they are the only ones with the truth?
- Are you allowed to question leadership without fear?
- Are you expected to agree... or allowed to discern?
- Does the Bible feel like a tool for control... or a way to know God?
- Is the Holy Spirit trusted... or replaced by rigid interpretation?
- Is authority centered on Jesus... or on people?

👉 **Notice:** Does this feel like guidance... or control? Guidance dignifies; control diminishes. Guidance invites participation; control demands compliance. Guidance is patient; control is pressured. If you feel smaller, silenced, or shamed when you raise honest questions, that is data worth honoring. The gospel produces sons and daughters, not subjects and spectators.



Your Reflection

What stands out to you in this section? Write what you observe without editing for politeness. God can handle your honesty. Then, ask the Holy Spirit to highlight patterns across conversations, sermons, and policies. Consistency over time reveals reality far more than a single interaction.

Where do you feel peace?

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Where do you feel pressure?

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Section 2: Jesus — Who/What Are They Actually Following?

This is the most important section.

It's not what church leaders say. It's what they live.

The credibility of any ministry is the fruit of its life, not the sharpness of its statements. Pay attention to practices around power, money, confession, and care for the vulnerable—these reveal what a church truly worships.

- Do they focus more on doctrine... or on obeying Jesus?
- Do they actually teach you how to follow Jesus?
- Is love the foundation... or fear?
- Are people drawn toward Jesus... or toward the institution?
- Does the way they describe and live out God reflect the love, mercy, and truth Jesus showed?

👉 **Ask yourself:**

“Does this look like the way Jesus treated people?”

**“If it doesn’t look like Jesus, it’s not the
Christianity Jesus founded.”**

Consider whether sermons translate into empowering people to love God and their neighbors in concrete ways. Are the poor, marginalized, and the people with questions treated as burdens—or beloved?

Maturity looks like the Beatitudes in motion, not merely sharper theological fences.

Where do you see alignment with Jesus?

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Where does something feel off?

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Section 3: Culture — How Do They Treat People?

This is where truth becomes visible. Culture is the lived attitude of a church—the habits, tone, and treatment that shape souls far more than slogans. Watch how conflict is handled, how dissent is treated, and how power moves in rooms you seldom see. Time unmask performance; love is hard to fake.

- How does church leadership treat people who disagree with them?
- How do they treat people who are different?
- Are some people protected while others are disciplined or pushed out?
- Do they welcome people who are different from them?
- Do they serve the community... or mostly themselves?

☞ **Pay attention to this:** Love is hard to fake over time. True love confesses, repairs, and restores. Performative love gives the appearance of inclusion while privately practicing exclusion. Compare public messaging with private stories; when they diverge, believe the patterns, not the press release.

“Love is hard to fake over time.”

Your Reflection

Write down real moments, not general impressions: emails unanswered, meetings behind closed doors, apologies offered or withheld, hospitality extended or rescinded. Patterns protect the truth from being gaslit by isolated exceptions. Remember, Jesus said the world would know his disciples by their love, not by their loyalty to a brand, a person, or a dogma.

What patterns do you notice?

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How do others actually experience this church?

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Section 4: Leadership — Who Holds Power?

Just observe honestly. Healthy leadership shares power, invites feedback, and welcomes light. Unhealthy leadership hoards power, punishes dissent, and hides in ambiguity. Ask the questions below and give yourself permission to accept the answers you discover, especially when they're uncomfortable.

- Is leadership accountable to anyone?
- Is there transparency with finances?
- Is authority shared... or centered on one person?
- Are leaders open... or defensive?
- Do they admit mistakes?

👉 **Ask:** "If this leadership structure failed me, what recourse would I actually have?" If the pathway for redress loops back to the very people in question, that is not accountability. Biblical authority bears the yoke of responsibility, not the perks of celebrity.

**"If this leadership structure failed me, what
recourse would I actually have?"**



Your Reflection

Consider the following: boards, bylaws, advisory teams, and whistleblower policies. Transparency isn't afraid of sunlight; it depends on it. Where repentance is practiced publicly and regularly, safety grows.

What feels healthy?

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What feels concerning?

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Section 5: Pressure — What Does It Feel Like to Be There?

Sometimes the clearest answer is how it feels. The Spirit's fruit is peace, not panic; freedom, not fear. Environments of coercion often disguise themselves as zeal.

Listen to your body and pay attention to the subtle signals that emerge before your mind constructs explanations.

- Do you feel free to be honest?
- Do you feel pressured to conform?
- Are you afraid of consequences?
- Are you constantly second-guessing yourself?
- Do they use fear to motivate... or love?

☞ **Notice your body:** Peace and pressure don't feel the same. Peace makes room to breathe, to think, to ask. Pressure shortens breath, narrows options, and shames curiosity. God's kindness leads to repentance; fear may produce compliance, but rarely love.

“Peace and pressure don't feel the same.”

Track your emotional baseline before, during, and after church involvement for several weeks. Do you leave lighter or heavier? More open to God and your neighbors or more guarded and suspicious? Your soul's "temperature" matters to Christ.

How do you feel when you are there?

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What emotions come up most often?

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Section 6: Integrity — What Happens When Things Go Wrong?

Ponder

- Is misconduct addressed... or hidden?
- Are people protected... or dismissed?
- Is there fairness... or favoritism?
- Are hard situations handled with truth... or silence?

👉 **Ask:** “When truth is costly, do they still tell it?” Integrity is revealed when the stakes are high. Communities that value truth over image seek independent assessments, care well for victims, and practice transparent restitution. Silence might feel safe in the short term, but it corrodes trust and deforms witness.

“When truth is costly, do they still tell it?”



Your Reflection

Write down specific examples of how leaders responded to harm, error, or conflict. Pay attention to whether apologies included repair. Is there clarity and change? Is the cost borne by leaders or by the wounded.

What have you observed?

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How do these actions and attitudes align with Jesus?

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Section 7: Alignment — Does This Church Reflect Jesus?

Step back. The ultimate question is alignment: Does this environment help you trust and follow Jesus more clearly? Discernment is not cynicism; it's love seeking what is true.

Your allegiance is to Christ. Any church worthy of your commitment will celebrate that.

- Does this environment help me follow Jesus more clearly?
- Do I feel closer to Jesus... or more controlled?
- Is my faith growing... or shrinking?
- Is this producing love... or fear?

👉 **The most important question:** “If I became more like the average member of this church, would I look more like Jesus?” If the honest answer is no, receive that clarity as a gift, not a failure. God is faithful to guide you into communities where Christlikeness is the norm, not the exception.

**“If I became more like the average member
of this church, would I look more like Jesus?”**



Your Reflection

Bring your response to God in prayer. Consider discussing it with a mature, trusted believer outside your church context to reduce bias and pressure. Remember: Jesus leads his sheep. He is not threatened by your desire to follow him well, but loves it.

Does this church Jesus or something/someone else?

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Did you get a different perspective after talking to someone?

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A Gentle Warning

When something feels off...

It's easy to swing too far the other way. From control → rebellion, pressure → isolation, confusion → reaction.

But clarity is different. Clarity is calm. Clarity is grounded. Clarity stays anchored in Jesus. Resist becoming what wounded you.

Keep your heart soft, your mind clear, and your will surrendered to Christ.

Your Next Step

You don't have to decide everything today. The way of Jesus honors process. Pick one section in this handbook. Sit with it slowly. Talk honestly with God. Ask for wisdom, courage, and peace. If you feel rushed, pause—rushing is rarely from the Spirit.

When you're ready, take one small faithful action: a clarifying conversation, a boundary, a question submitted in writing, or time away to pray.

- Pick one section
- Sit with it slowly
- Talk honestly with God

Final Encouragement

You don't have to choose between following Jesus and thinking clearly.

You were meant to do both. And if something inside you is asking questions... it may not be doubt. It's probably discernment. Jesus is gentle with seekers and firm with bullies. He will shepherd you through this with tenderness and truth. Keep your eyes on Christ.

“Keep your eyes on Christ”

**Thank you for your thoughtful approach
to the ideas in this handbook.**

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