

Doubt and the Accusation of Instability — 28

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Revised August 2026

Central claim

Christians who use James 1:5–8, Matthew 21:21–22, or John 20:29 as a general prohibition on evidence-sensitive reservation apply an update-asymmetric rule. If favorable considerations may raise confidence, relevant defeaters must be permitted to lower it; a norm that makes warranted downward revision culpable cannot govern responsible public inquiry. This conclusion targets that generalized use of the texts, not every reading of them, every form of faith, private religious warrant, or the truth of Christianity.

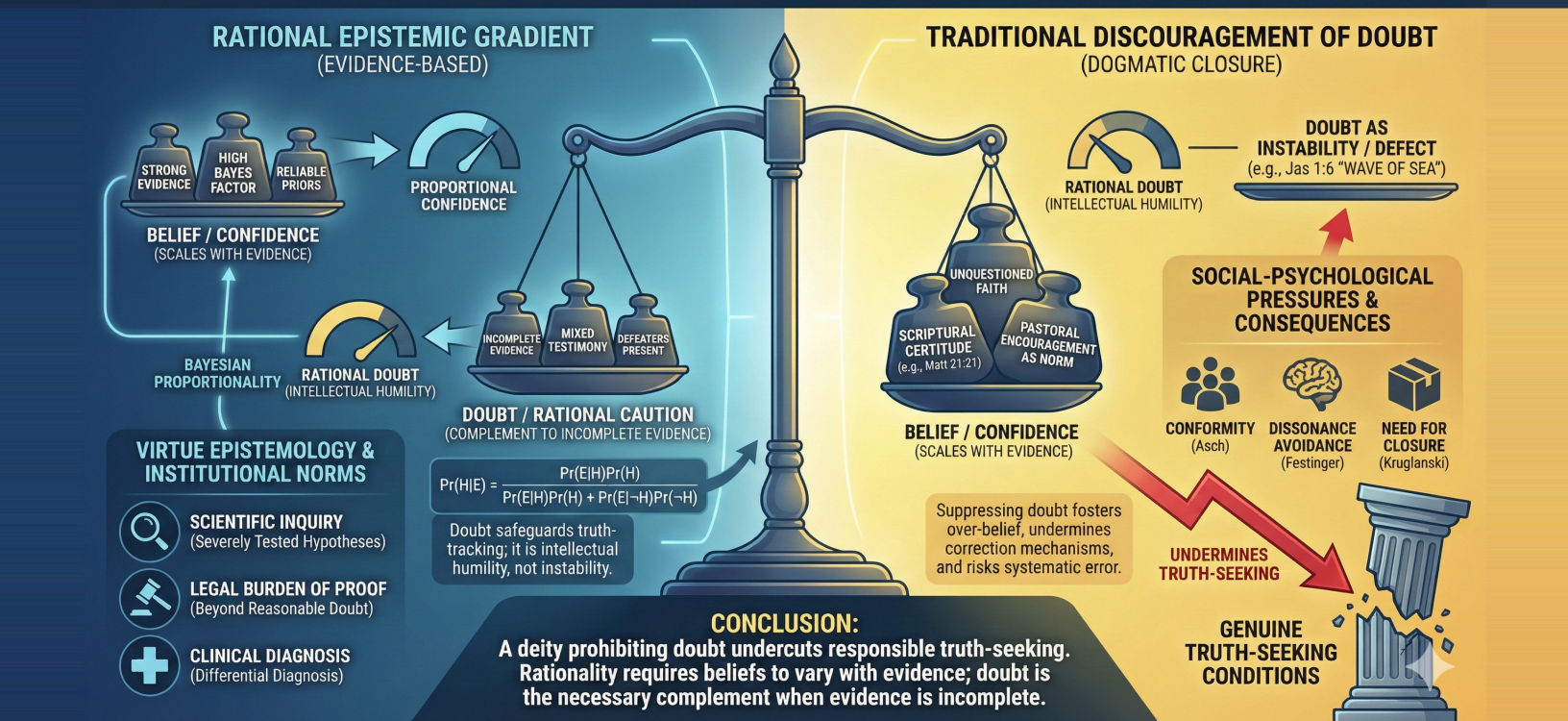
Preview:

Target practice	Governing bridge	Epistemic pressure	Rational response
Generalize anti-doubt passages into a rebuke of conscientious reservation about public claims.	A rule for responsible confidence must permit warranted upward and downward revision.	The target rule accepts reasons that raise confidence but makes a reasoned decrease culpable.	Separate faith or commitment from inflated confidence and protect evidence-sensitive revision.

The conclusion is conditional: if the passages are confined to prayer, loyalty, or pastoral encouragement rather than made into a general rule of belief, the central criticism does not apply.

Visual preview:

THE EPISTEMIC GRADIENT: RATIONAL BELIEF & DOUBT AS COMPLEMENTS



The graphic contrasts proportional confidence with a generalized anti-doubt closure and names several mechanisms that can make correction socially costly. Its final conditional applies only to a God-concept—a specified conception of a deity—that requires suppression of warranted doubt; it does not show that the cited passages require that conception or that theism is false.

Abstract

Some Christian settings use James 1:5–8, Matthew 21:21–22, and John 20:29 to portray doubt or questioning as instability or spiritual failure. The central issue is not whether every doubt is virtuous or whether those passages, read in context, state a general theory of belief. It is whether they may responsibly be generalized into a rule that censures evidence-sensitive reservation about publicly answerable claims. That use fails. An acceptable rule for responsible confidence must permit warranted revision in either direction. A generalized anti-doubt rule makes that permission asymmetric: reassurance may increase confidence, but contrary evidence may not lower it without moral suspicion. The result is not stability but insulation from correction. The case is cumulative. Conceptual and early-Christian evidence distinguishes conscientious reservation from indecision and obstinate disbelief; current philosophy of faith shows that commitment, reliance, and action need not require inflated credence; scientific, legal, and clinical practices preserve uncertainty because error correction depends on it; and longitudinal research on religious doubt joins social psychology in identifying closure and suppression pressures that sanctions can intensify. The conclusion is bounded. It neither establishes evidentialism as the only theory of warrant nor disproves Christianity, theism, or private religious knowledge. It shows that anyone who invokes the passages as public guidance should distinguish pastoral encouragement from a doxastic veto and protect a believer's right to let confidence move downward as well as upward with the evidence.

Keywords: doubt; doubt suppression; faith; update symmetry; virtue epistemology; religious epistemology; Christianity; inquiry

1. The Accusation Under Pressure

Christian discourse sometimes turns doubt into a diagnosis of character. James describes a petitioner who doubts as wave-like and “double-minded” (Jas 1:5–8); Matthew links undoubting faith with the movement of a mountain (Matt 21:21–22); and John contrasts Thomas's sight with the blessedness of those who have not seen (John 20:29). In sermons, counseling, and ordinary religious argument, such language can become a compact rebuke: stable believers trust, unstable believers doubt.

The target is recognizable but not universal. One evangelical ministry resource explicitly connects James's double-minded language with doubt about Jesus and questioning what the Bible says, then recommends Bible study, prayer, and like-minded fellowship as the route toward stability (Got Questions Ministries, 2026). In a longitudinal study of older adults, Krause and Ellison measured suppression partly by agreement that questioning one's religious beliefs is wrong and found that negative congregational interaction predicted more suppression (Krause & Ellison, 2009). These examples establish that the target occurs; they do not estimate its prevalence or show that the passages require it.

That rebuke is harmless when it means “do not let panic prevent a reasonable action” or “remain loyal while a practical difficulty passes.” It becomes epistemically dangerous when it means “do not reduce confidence in a factual claim even when its support weakens.” A factual claim is *publicly answerable* when its truth is offered as a description of the world and its evidential force can be discussed without first requiring membership in one religious community. Claims about historical events, fulfilled predictions, public miracles, or reliable intervention are examples. Confidence in such claims should answer to reasons that bear on whether they are true.

The paper's challenge is therefore exact. If anti-doubt passages are used to make conscientious reservation culpable while the relevant evidence remains incomplete or contested, the resulting norm withholds moral permission for one direction of rational learning. It accepts testimony, reassurance, or experience as reasons for confidence to rise but marks a reasoned decrease under contrary evidence as instability. A rule that turns a correction mechanism into a character indictment is not evidence-responsive stability. It is a normative veto on learning.

This target is narrower than evidentialism as a complete theory of justification. Conee and Feldman defend the strong view that epistemic justification is fixed by one's evidence (Conee & Feldman, 2004); Plantinga argues

that a true Christian belief could possess warrant through properly functioning cognitive faculties even when it is not inferred from public evidence (Plantinga, 2000). The present argument need not settle that dispute. Even an externalist theory—one on which a believer may have warrant without being able to display all of its basis—must take possible defeaters seriously. And when a claim is offered to other people as *public* evidence, the question is not merely whether its proponent might privately possess warrant. The question is what the shared evidence supports.

The symmetry requirement

An epistemic rule for publicly answerable claims must permit confidence to move in either direction when reasons warrant it. A rule that welcomes favorable considerations yet makes warranted downward revision culpable is update-asymmetric. It cannot claim the credit of evidence-responsive inquiry while withholding permission for one of its required corrections.

2. Three Different Things Called Doubt

The claim that doubt is simply the mathematical complement of belief is too crude. For a binary proposition, one may assign less confidence to the proposition and more to its negation. But ordinary “doubt” can name at least three different postures: reserved confidence, practical hesitation, and resistant refusal. They should not receive one moral verdict.

Kind of doubt	What it is	When it is rational	Proper criticism
Conscientious reservation	Confidence withheld or reduced because evidence is weak, mixed, dependent, or defeated	When available reasons do not warrant firmer confidence	Ask whether the evidence was assessed fairly; do not condemn reservation merely for being reservation
Practical hesitation	Difficulty acting despite a confidence level that may already be adequate	When stakes, costs, or uncertainty make delay prudent; irrational when delay predictably defeats a justified aim	Address the decision, stakes, and costs rather than pretending action and belief are identical
Resistant refusal	Unwillingness to accept a conclusion despite strong, accessible, and adequately checked support	When apparent support is misleading; otherwise it can express dogmatism or motivated avoidance	Identify the ignored evidence and the standard being applied inconsistently

Table 1: Three postures commonly called doubt. The paper defends conscientious reservation, not indecision in every practical setting or refusal in the face of strong evidence.

Table 1 matters because an accusation can trade on ambiguity. A preacher may begin with the reasonable criticism that paralysis can obstruct action and end with the unreasonable conclusion that reduced confidence is itself vicious. Or a defender may point to an obstinate skeptic and then apply the same label to an inquirer whose confidence fell after encountering a defeater. The paper rejects that slide. Early Christian texts likewise do not present doubt as one simple psychological state: Schliesser identifies six broad types and eighteen coping or resilience patterns across prominent texts (Schliesser, 2023). That historical taxonomy is not identical to the present three-part distinction, but it reinforces the need to disambiguate doubt before assigning one moral verdict.

Probabilism makes one part of the point precise: coherent degrees of confidence should not be adjusted independently of the relationships among propositions (Joyce, 1998). Yet the argument does not need to identify doubt with a formula such as $1 - \Pr(H \mid E)$. That formula confuses low confidence in H with uncertainty about H .

A person who assigns 0.05 to H may be highly confident that H is false, not deeply uncertain. Evidence-sensitive doubt is better understood as disciplined reservation: refusing to claim more confidence than the reasons warrant and remaining willing to revise in either direction.

This is a virtue only under the right conditions. Intellectual humility is not reflexive timidity, and open-mindedness is not an obligation to keep every possibility equally alive. Character-based virtue epistemology treats inquiry as requiring motives, skills, and dispositions ordered toward epistemic goods (Baehr, 2011). Recent work also classifies dogmatism and narrow-mindedness as intellectual vices that impair agency in inquiry (Baehr, 2025). The relevant virtue is therefore *calibration*: confidence strong enough to follow good evidence, modest enough to register uncertainty, and mobile enough to change.

3. What the Biblical Passages Do—and Do Not—Establish

The three cited passages occur in different literary settings. James 1 concerns a petition for wisdom amid trial and immediately develops the image of a divided person. Matthew 21 places undoubting faith in the rhetoric of prayer following the fig tree episode. John 20 closes the Thomas scene and turns from sight to the testimony on which later readers must rely. Major commentaries examine those local rhetorical and theological functions rather than treating the verses as interchangeable pieces of a general epistemology (Allison, 2013; Brown, 1970; France, 2007; Thompson, 2015).

The ordinary English label also hides a lexical dispute. Spitaler argues that the middle or passive form of *diakrínesthai* in Matthew 21:21 and James 1:6 may retain senses connected with conflict or separation rather than acquire a special inward sense of “doubt” (Spitaler, 2007). The present paper need not settle that dispute. It evaluates the English-language use of the passages as a generalized rule, and the dispute itself undercuts the assumption that all three texts transparently state one epistemology.

That diversity creates a straightforward burden. Anyone who uses the passages to govern belief formation in every evidence-sensitive domain must supply an argument from the local exhortation to the general rule. Merely placing the verses side by side does not provide it. Prayerful resolve is not the same mental state as historical confidence; loyalty is not the same as assent; reliance on testimony is not belief without any evidence; and a rebuke of divided commitment is not automatically a rebuke of every considered reservation.

This hermeneutic caution strengthens rather than evades the paper’s challenge. There are two routes:

Reading	What it preserves	Evidential consequence
Pastoral or practical exhortation	Courage, loyalty, prayer, or action without claiming that confidence exceeds the available reasons	No conflict with evidence-sensitive doubt; the passage supplies encouragement, not added public evidence for the contested claim
General doxastic prohibition	A rule that treats reduced confidence or unresolved reservation as a spiritual defect	Conflicts with responsible inquiry whenever the evidence remains weak, mixed, or defeated, because the rule blocks warranted downward revision

Table 2: The interpretive fork. Restricting the passages to pastoral or practical work avoids the critique but also prevents them from functioning as a shortcut to stronger public confidence.

The first route is a live Christian alternative. It lets a community encourage perseverance while permitting beliefs about public matters to remain corrigible. The second route is the target under pressure. It cannot claim the epistemic credit of evidence-responsive belief while disabling the response to evidence that points down.

4. Faith Need Not Mean Inflated Confidence

A strong reply distinguishes faith from an unsupported increase in credence. Bishop describes a modest fideistic venture as a practical commitment under evidential ambiguity, subject to moral constraints (Bishop, 2007). Buchak argues that faith may concern ending a search for further evidence and acting on a proposition rather than adopting a degree of belief unsupported by evidence (Buchak, 2012). Howard-Snyder and McKaughan develop an account on which faith can take the form of resilient reliance and can coexist with belief-cancelling doubt (Howard-Snyder & McKaughan, 2023). Mugg defends the opposing view that propositional faith entails belief and argues that apparent cases of faith without belief can be redescribed (Mugg, 2022).

That disagreement is useful. It shows that “faith” does not carry one uncontested psychological meaning from which an anti-doubt verdict simply follows. More importantly, neither side licenses arbitrary confidence. On a non-doxastic account, a person may commit or rely while accurately acknowledging uncertainty. On a doxastic account, the believer still needs an answer about what makes the belief appropriately held and how defeaters are handled. The word *faith* cannot do the work of evidence merely by being pronounced.

The distinction also prevents an overreach in the other direction. Hope, worship, trust, and costly commitment are not reducible to a probability assignment. A person may decide, love, promise, or participate under uncertainty. The epistemic demand is more modest: do not describe a worldly claim with more confidence than one’s account of warrant supports, and do not treat a downward revision as immoral merely because it threatens a valued commitment.

For a God-concept that permits faith amid uncertainty, conscientious doubt is not necessarily betrayal. It can be honest representation of the believer’s present epistemic position. For a God-concept that commands certainty regardless of unresolved defeaters, the problem is deeper: the command would make accurate self-assessment culpable. Such a conception may remain logically possible, but it would undercut the norms by which agents distinguish truth from wish, error, and social pressure.

5. Why Correction Requires Protected Doubt

The central case is cumulative. No analogy or experiment by itself establishes the conclusion. Together, four strands explain why a general anti-doubt rule carries a predictable epistemic cost.

Strand	Correction requirement	Pressure created by anti-doubt sanction	Contribution and limit
Conceptual symmetry	Confidence must be able to respond to favorable and unfavorable reasons	Downward revision acquires a moral penalty that upward revision lacks	Establishes the rule’s asymmetry; does not decide which contested claim is true
Institutional practice	Error-sensitive fields preserve alternatives until a burden or test is met	Reservation is recoded as personal weakness rather than a response to an unmet burden	Shows why structured uncertainty is useful; analogies do not make religion identical to law, science, or medicine
Intellectual character	Humility and open-mindedness require acknowledged fallibility and willingness to revise	Loyalty and certainty can be rewarded even when calibration worsens	Explains a virtue cost; doubt can still become vicious when it ignores strong evidence
Social mechanisms	Dissent and counterevidence must remain discussable for group correction	Closure, conformity, negative interaction, and suppressed private disagreement become easier to sustain	Identifies known risk mechanisms and a measured suppression response; it does not prove a doctrine false or characterize every community

Table 3: Evidence ledger for the cumulative argument. Each strand bears on the cost of suppressing warranted doubt while retaining a distinct scope limit.

5.1 Institutionalized uncertainty is a safeguard, not an embarrassment

Science exposes hypotheses to tests they may fail; legal burdens make an unresolved reasonable doubt decisive in criminal adjudication; clinical diagnosis keeps multiple explanations live until observations discriminate among them. These institutions differ in aims and standards. Their shared lesson is not that every belief should remain forever unsettled. It is that uncertainty has a legitimate role in preventing premature closure.

Evidence-based medicine, for example, joins clinical expertise with the best available external evidence rather than replacing judgment with a slogan or a single study (Sackett et al., 1996). The practice works only if clinicians may retain alternatives, register contrary data, and revise a diagnosis. Religious belief is not a clinical diagnosis. The analogy concerns the correction structure: wherever agents make truth-apt claims under incomplete information, a norm that penalizes reservation raises the cost of noticing error.

5.2 Social pressure can mimic certainty

Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance explains why people are motivated to reduce conflict among commitments (Festinger, 1957). Asch's classic conformity studies show how an incorrect group consensus can pressure public judgments (Asch, 1955). Kruglanski and Webster describe a need for closure that can encourage early "seizing" on an answer and later "freezing" against alternatives (Kruglanski & Webster, 1996). Prentice and Miller's work on pluralistic ignorance shows how individuals can privately reject a norm while mistakenly believing that others accept it (Prentice & Miller, 1993). Research on religious and spiritual struggles likewise treats doubt as one dimension of a wider and measurable field of conflict rather than as a single moral pathology (Exline et al., 2014).

Krause and Ellison's longitudinal study makes the connection more direct. Negative interaction with fellow congregants predicted greater suppression of religious doubt, while suppression was associated with less favorable health over time (Krause & Ellison, 2009). The design does not show that a scriptural norm caused either suppression or poorer health, but it confirms that suppression is a measurable response with nontrivial correlates.

These findings do not show that belief is false, that religion uniquely produces conformity, or that a doubter is automatically more rational than a confident believer. They establish something more modest and relevant: groups possess ordinary mechanisms that can manufacture the appearance of consensus and make revision personally expensive. A norm that equates doubt with instability feeds those mechanisms. A community confident in its claims should want the opposite environment—one in which reservations can be voiced, evidence can be checked, and agreement does not have to be inferred from silence.

6. The Strongest Replies

6.1 "Trust does not wait for proof"

Trust often outruns proof because life requires action before certainty. The reply succeeds against a demand for certainty and fails against the actual thesis. Evidence-sensitive doubt does not require proof before every commitment. It requires accurate representation of confidence and continuing sensitivity to defeaters. A spouse may trust while acknowledging a live concern; a patient may choose a treatment while recognizing uncertainty; a believer may practice while refusing to describe contested claims as certain. Practical reliance and epistemic overstatement are different.

6.2 "The belief may be warranted even without public evidence"

Plantinga's externalist model makes that possibility philosophically serious. If Christianity is true and the relevant cognitive processes function as intended, Christian belief could possess warrant that is not derived from public argument (Plantinga, 2000). The present paper does not disprove that conditional. It draws two boundaries.

First, private warrant does not automatically become public evidence for another person. Second, an externalist believer still needs a practice for handling apparent defeaters. Treating every defeater as a temptation to doubt rather than a possible reason to revise would make the account practically immune to correction.

6.3 “Persistent doubt can corrode a person and a community”

It can. Unending rumination, compulsive checking, or refusal to act can be harmful. That is why Table 1 separates conscientious reservation from every form of hesitation. A pastoral response may address anxiety, belonging, or action while leaving the person’s evidential assessment intact. The error is to promise pastoral relief by demanding a confidence level the reasons do not support.

6.4 “The passages were never meant as general epistemology”

This is the strongest textual reply, and it concedes the paper’s main limit. If the passages concern prayer, loyalty, or the situation of later witnesses rather than a blanket prohibition on evidence-sensitive doubt, the central criticism does not apply to the texts themselves. It still applies when speakers generalize them. The responsible resolution is not to keep the rebuke while denying its implications. It is to stop using the passages to shame conscientious reservation about public claims.

7. A Constructive Charter for Religious Inquiry

A community can protect faith practices without protecting every confidence level. Four norms would make the distinction visible.

1. **Separate belonging from assent.** A person should be able to voice uncertainty without having membership, love, or moral standing immediately placed on trial.
2. **Name the kind of claim.** A claim offered as public history, prediction, or intervention should face public standards. A claim offered as private warrant, hope, or liturgical meaning should not borrow evidential force from the first category.
3. **Require update symmetry.** Whatever permits confidence to rise must have a counterpart that could lower it. Ask in advance what observation, argument, or defeater would rationally reduce confidence.
4. **Treat dissent as error control.** Give conscientious objectors access to contrary evidence, require fair summaries of rival positions, and do not infer consensus from silence produced by sanction.

These norms do not mandate skepticism. They make confidence earn its stability. A belief that survives protected criticism, real alternatives, and explicit defeat conditions is epistemically stronger than one stabilized by the accusation that questioning is itself a defect.

8. Conclusion

Evidence-sensitive doubt is not the enemy of stable inquiry. It is one of the conditions under which stability can be distinguished from rigidity. When reasons improve, confidence may rightly increase. When reasons weaken, alternatives strengthen, or defeaters remain unresolved, confidence must also be free to decrease. A generalized anti-doubt rule breaks that symmetry by granting one movement spiritual permission and placing the other under moral suspicion.

The cumulative case makes the cost visible. Conceptually, the rule blocks a necessary direction of updating. Institutionally, it rejects the protected uncertainty through which error-sensitive practices avoid premature closure. In the language of character, it can reward dogmatism over calibration. Socially, it amplifies familiar pressures

toward conformity, hidden disagreement, and motivated closure. None of these points proves Christianity false, establishes evidentialism as the only theory of warrant, or shows that the cited passages require a blanket prohibition on doubt.

The requested change is precise. Christians should stop using James 1:5–8, Matthew 21:21–22, or John 20:29 to shame conscientious reservation about publicly answerable claims. Read pastorally, the passages may encourage prayer, loyalty, or action without inflating confidence. Read as a general doxastic veto, they undermine the truth-seeking discipline that any confident worldview should welcome. The decisive question is not whether doubt feels stable. It is whether the rule applied to doubt leaves a person genuinely able to learn that a cherished claim deserves less confidence than before.

A. Formal Reconstruction of the Central Thesis

Premise 1. A norm for governing responsible confidence in publicly answerable claims is epistemically acceptable only if it permits warranted upward and downward revision.

Premise 2. Any norm that treats evidence-sensitive reservation or warranted downward revision as culpable does not permit warranted downward revision.

Premise 3. When James 1:5–8, Matthew 21:21–22, or John 20:29 is generalized into an anti-doubt rule for publicly answerable claims, the resulting norm treats such reservation or downward revision as culpable instability.

Conclusion. Therefore, when those passages are generalized in that way, the resulting anti-doubt rule is not an epistemically acceptable norm for publicly answerable claims and undermines responsible inquiry.

Validity. The inference is deductively valid: Premise 1 states a necessary condition of an acceptable epistemic norm; Premise 2 identifies a class of norms that fails that condition; and Premise 3 places the generalized use of the passages in that class. The conclusion follows for that use. If the passages are not generalized in this way, Premise 3 does not apply.

Support for the premises. Premise 1 is a normative symmetry claim supported by the corrective role of defeaters in inquiry. Premise 2 concerns normative permission: it does not claim that every sanction always causes compliance. Premise 3 is interpretive and empirical, not guaranteed by the biblical texts alone. The ministry example and doubt-suppression study establish that the targeted practice is recognizable, but they do not establish its prevalence or show that the texts require it. The argument therefore does not show that every form of faith is irrational, that Christianity is false, or that private religious warrant is impossible.

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