

The Boundary-Retreat Device

No True Christian Reasoning, Identity Policing, and the Survival of Idealized Christendom

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Central claim

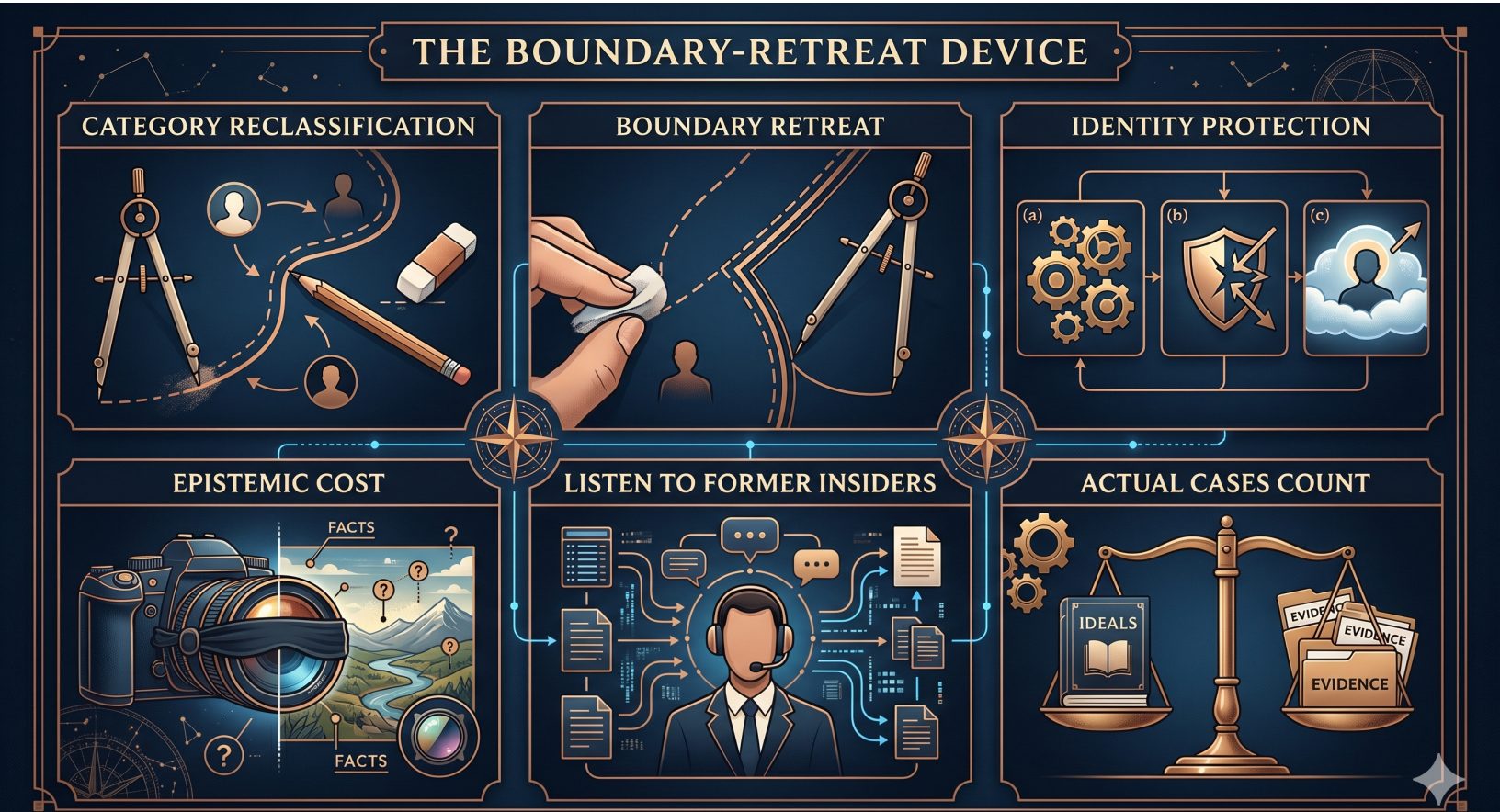
A community cannot rationally count profession, devotion, service, sacrifice, and apparent transformation as evidence of genuine Christianity while a person remains loyal, then declare that same record evidentially worthless merely because the person later leaves. Criteria must be fixed in advance and applied symmetrically. If lifelong perseverance alone decides who was genuine, confident present recognition must give way to honest uncertainty.

Preview:

Present credit	Retrospective escape	Symmetry test	Unavoidable choice
Devotion and transformation are cited as evidence that Christianity is real and effective.	Later deconversion or serious failure is said to prove the person was never genuinely Christian.	Would the same criteria and evidence have produced the same classification before the threatening outcome was known?	Admit corrigible countercases, or make every living person’s “true Christian” status provisional.

The argument does not claim that every profession is sincere or that one apostate disproves Christianity. It targets a one-way evidential rule: favorable cases count for the worldview, while unfavorable cases are excluded solely because they are unfavorable.

Visual preview:



The image traces the boundary-retreat sequence. An apparent countercase enters the evidential record; the membership boundary is moved after the outcome; the idealized group is protected; and the cost is loss of contact with disconfirming evidence. The lower panels show the corrective: examine former insiders’ actual histories and apply the same membership standards before and after their departure.

Abstract

The claim that an apostate, abuser, hypocrite, or failed exemplar was “never a true Christian” may sometimes identify a real mistake in classification. It becomes a boundary-retreat device when the criteria are revised only after a threatening case appears. The decisive problem is not that communities draw boundaries. It is that favorable and unfavorable evidence are often processed under different rules. Profession, worship, ministry, sacrifice, testimony, apparent transformation, and communal recognition count as evidence of genuine Christianity while a person remains loyal. If that person later deconverts or violates central Christian norms, the same history is reclassified as counterfeit. The worldview receives present credit without accepting retrospective liability.

This paper develops a prospective symmetry test. A repair is evidentially legitimate only when its criteria were available before the outcome, can classify favorable cases as false as well as unfavorable cases, are supported independently of the need to protect the worldview, and carry the same consequences for present classification. This yields a dilemma. If observable signs justify confident present claims that someone is a genuine Christian, later failure must sometimes count as evidence about Christian formation, testimony, institutions, or the reliability of those signs. If lifelong perseverance is the decisive criterion, no living believer has completed it, so present claims of genuine status are necessarily provisional. One may choose corrigibility or present uncertainty. One may not rationally combine warm certainty now with categorical erasure later.

Social identity, cognitive dissonance, motivated reasoning, purity boundaries, and costly commitment help explain why the retreat is attractive without establishing the motives of any particular believer. Recent research also undermines the caricature of deconversion as a single shallow event: formerly religious populations are heterogeneous, intellectual and institutional reasons recur, and religious psychology can persist after deidentification. Their testimony is fallible evidence, not an oracle; it deserves the same source-sensitive scrutiny applied to conversion testimony. The conclusion is bounded but polemical. An ideal may criticize actual Christianity, but it cannot absorb every success and disown every failure. A Christianity curated so that only victories belong to it has protected its image by forfeiting a public evidential record.

Keywords: No True Christian; No True Scotsman; deconversion; religious identity; motivated reasoning; epistemic symmetry; perseverance; Christian testimony

1 The Move in One Sentence

When a person leaves Christianity after years of prayer, worship, study, ministry, sacrifice, or publicly affirmed transformation, a familiar reply appears: the person was never a true Christian. The reply can be correct. Human beings misrepresent themselves, misunderstand themselves, join communities for mixed reasons, and sometimes perform identities they do not possess. No serious analysis should force a community to treat every verbal profession as decisive.

The problem begins when the reply is licensed by the very event it is meant to explain. Before departure, the person’s profession and practice count as evidence of genuine faith. After departure, the later outcome is used to cancel the earlier record. The classification boundary retreats at the exact point where a counterexample would otherwise enter view. A case that once supported the worldview is removed when it threatens the worldview.

The “No True Scotsman” label is useful but incomplete. Informal fallacies are best understood in relation to how an argument functions in context, not by matching a sentence to a forbidden verbal pattern (Walton 1995; Manninen 2018). Sometimes a disputed example genuinely fails a relevant definition. A pacifist who secretly advocates aggressive war may not be a pacifist. Sometimes, however, the definition is altered after the fact to preserve a universal claim. If no Scotsman commits an atrocity because anyone who commits an atrocity thereby becomes “not a true Scotsman,” the universal claim has not survived evidence; it has been protected from evidence.

The Christian version carries more weight because the category does more work. “Christian” can name a public affiliation, a doctrinal identity, a theological status before the Christian deity, an expected

pattern of character, an institutional role, or a claim about salvation. Those meanings need not coincide. The boundary-retreat device exploits their movement. Observable participation is treated as enough for testimony and group recognition, while an invisible theological status is invoked when the observable record becomes inconvenient.

The evidential charge

The device takes credit under an observable standard and avoids loss under an unobservable or retrospective standard. The central question is not whether hidden insincerity is possible. It is whether the evidence is being counted by one stable rule.

This charge is deliberately narrower than a disproof of Christianity. A deconversion does not show that Christian doctrine is false. Wrongdoing by Christians does not show that every Christian ethic is false. The paper asks what these cases can count against when Christian communities themselves make public claims about transformation, discernment, spiritual fruit, durable faith, and the reliability of conversion testimony. Once those claims are offered as evidence, contrary cases belong in the ledger.

2 Three Claims Hidden Inside “Christian”

Much confusion disappears once three different questions are separated. A person can be Christian in a sociological sense, fail an ideal stated by Christian theology, and have an unknown theological status. None of those descriptions automatically settles the others.

Table 1: Three claims often compressed into the phrase “true Christian.”

Claim type	Typical evidence	What the claim can establish	What it cannot establish by itself
Sociological membership	Self-identification, baptism, attendance, ministry, accepted communal role, and participation over time	The person belonged to and acted within an identifiable Christian community.	Invisible sincerity, salvation, lifelong perseverance, or doctrinal truth
Normative or ideal conformity	Conduct and commitments measured against a stated Christian ideal	How closely the case matches that community’s announced standard	Whether the person lacked all sincere Christian belief or social membership
Theological status	Regeneration, election, saving faith, or standing before the Christian deity	Whatever follows within a theology if the status is independently established	A publicly observable classification when the status is defined as inward and inaccessible

2.1 Sociological membership is not trivial

If a person attended for twenty years, led worship, preached, raised children in the faith, was trusted by church leaders, and described life through Christian categories, it is historically true that the person participated in Christianity. Theological reclassification cannot erase those years from a study of institutions, formation, testimony, or identity. Calling the person “never Christian” may express a theological verdict, but it cannot make the person’s Christian social history disappear.

This matters because many public claims are social and causal. Churches cite changed lives, durable communities, charitable institutions, sacrificial service, and conversion testimony as evidence of Christian truth or efficacy. These are not descriptions of an invisible roll known only to a deity. They are claims about recognizable people and practices. A reply that shifts to invisible status only when the results are bad changes the subject.

2.2 An ideal can criticize members without deleting them

Every tradition needs ideals. Christians can coherently say that a Christian acted contrary to Christian teaching, just as democrats can say that a democracy violated democratic principles. Indeed, an ideal is most useful when it can criticize the community that names it. If the ideal instead converts every violation into evidence of nonmembership, it stops criticizing members and begins purifying the label.

This distinction removes a common false choice. One need not allow cruel conduct to define Christian ideals. Nor need one declare every cruel Christian unreal. The ordinary, informative statement is often: a real member of a Christian community violated that community's stated norms. That description preserves both the ideal and the evidence.

2.3 Invisible status cannot do public evidential work for free

A theological tradition may hold that genuine regeneration is inward, known fully only to the Christian deity, and revealed decisively by lifelong perseverance. That position is coherent as a theological stipulation. Its public consequence is severe: observers should become modest about confidently identifying true Christians now. An unobservable status cannot be used as a confident public classification when cases look favorable and then treated as unknowable when cases turn unfavorable.

The same point applies to conversion testimony. If tears, conviction, changed habits, answered prayer, costly service, spiritual experience, and communal confirmation can be mistaken in the deconvert's earlier life, those signs can be mistaken in a current believer's life. The skeptical lesson is symmetrical. It does not single out apostates. It lowers confidence in every diagnosis based on the same evidence.

3 When Category Repair Is Legitimate

Categories must sometimes be repaired. New evidence can reveal deception, ambiguity, or an omitted distinction. The relevant demand is not rigidity but disciplined revision. Four tests distinguish correction from retreat.

Table 2: The prospective symmetry test for membership repair.

Test	Question	Legitimate repair	Boundary retreat
Prospective availability	Was the criterion stated and usable before the threatening outcome?	Prior rules reveal that the original classification was mistaken.	A new condition appears only after the case becomes costly.
Outcome neutrality	Can the rule exclude a loyal success and retain a departing countercase?	The same evidence has the same weight whichever result follows.	Departure or scandal effectively supplies the definition of "never genuine."
Independent support	Is there evidence for the criterion beyond its protective usefulness?	The criterion follows from a stable doctrine, practice, or validated diagnostic purpose.	The sole reason for adopting it is that it saves the universal claim.
Present consequence	Is the rule's uncertainty admitted in present classification?	Confidence is limited when decisive evidence is unavailable.	Present insiders are treated as certainly genuine, then retrospectively declared unknowable or false.

The first test does not require that every rule be written before any case occurs. Inquiry can discover better distinctions. It requires that a revision explain more than the single threat that provoked it. A useful repair should identify other cases, improve prediction, or expose prior errors in both favorable and unfavorable directions. If a criterion only ejects embarrassing cases, its precision is suspiciously directional.

The second test blocks a hidden outcome label. Suppose “genuine” means “will never deconvert.” Then the rule is not diagnosing the earlier state from the earlier evidence. It is naming the eventual outcome. That may be a permissible definition, but it cannot then support the causal claim that genuine Christianity produces perseverance. “Those who persevere are those who persevere” is not evidence of a mechanism.

The third test concerns independent reason. Scriptural commitments can supply such a reason within Christian theology. For example, a perseverance doctrine may be grounded in a community’s reading of its canon rather than invented for a particular apostate. Even then, using the doctrine in public argument carries consequences. The scripture and its interpretation become premises requiring support, and present classification inherits the uncertainty created by a life-completion criterion.

The fourth test is where the rhetoric often breaks. Communities commonly speak with confidence about current members as regenerated believers, reliable testimonies, or examples of Christian transformation. After departure they say that human observers could never have known the heart. Both statements cannot retain full force. If the heart was unavailable then, it is unavailable now.

4 The Double-Entry Evidential Problem

Christian apologetics and testimony often invite observers to notice actual lives. A destructive pattern ends, a family reconciles, a person serves at great cost, a frightened believer becomes resilient, or a community sustains cooperation. These cases are offered as fruits, signs, or evidence. The proposal is not merely that Christianity has a beautiful ideal; it is that Christianity helps explain observable outcomes.

An evidential practice that takes this credit acquires liability. Some Christians later abandon the belief after serious inquiry. Some retain the label while engaging in conduct that their own traditions condemn. Some institutions repeatedly create incentives for concealment, hierarchy, fear, or abuse. None of these outcomes single-handedly refutes Christianity. They do, however, bear on claims about formation, discernment, institutions, spiritual guidance, and the reliability of the public markers used in successful testimony.

The boundary-retreat device tries to keep only one side of this ledger. A loyal person’s devotion is a fruit of genuine faith; a deconvert’s former devotion was imitation. A current leader’s service confirms transformation; an exposed leader’s service concealed an unchanged heart. A thriving congregation shows Christian vitality; a destructive congregation was never truly Christian. The protected category accumulates successes while failures are charged to an external account.

This is not caution. Caution would reduce confidence in both directions. If observable signs are weak, then favorable cases should receive less apologetic weight. If observable signs are strong enough to support favorable inferences, then unfavorable developments can rationally revise those inferences and pressure the underlying claims. The evidential rule must choose a level of confidence and keep it.

4.1 Asymmetry survives without malicious intent

The practice need not be cynical. Motivated reasoning does not usually feel like fabrication; people search memory and doctrine under a preferred conclusion and often find considerations they genuinely regard as relevant (Kunda 1990). Cognitive dissonance can make reinterpretation attractive when a costly commitment collides with an unsettling case (Festinger 1957; Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter 1956). These mechanisms explain why sincere reasoners can produce one-way standards. They do not show that every defender is motivated, nor do they decide the argument by diagnosing psychology.

The argument stands even if every participant is perfectly sincere. Ask whether the criteria were fixed before the outcome, whether the same evidence is weighed both ways, and whether present confidence matches retrospective skepticism. A psychological explanation of the maneuver is supplementary. The inconsistency is visible in the rule itself.

5 The Perseverance Dilemma

Some Christian traditions answer that perseverance is not a convenient revision but a defining mark of genuine faith. A person who finally abandons Christianity thereby shows that saving faith was absent, however convincing the earlier appearance. The view deserves to be stated strongly because it exposes, rather than eliminates, the paper's central dilemma.

If completed lifelong perseverance is decisive, no living person's perseverance is complete. One may have strong evidence of stability, but the future event that supposedly settles genuineness has not occurred. A person can therefore be recognized as a Christian in a social or provisional sense, yet cannot be identified with certainty as one who will persevere for life.

The cost is not theological incoherence. The cost is present epistemic modesty. Churches may say, "On the available evidence, we provisionally regard this person as a sincere Christian." They may not rationally say, "This life proves what genuine Christianity produces," and later, "The departure proves the life never belonged in the sample." The first statement treats present signs as evidence of the decisive status. The second treats those signs as powerless against the future outcome.

1. If current observable signs justify confident classification as a genuine Christian, then later deconversion can overturn a genuinely warranted classification and must be allowed to update claims based on those signs.
2. If later deconversion proves that the person was never genuine because lifelong perseverance is decisive, then current observable signs do not justify confident classification before the life is complete.
3. Therefore, a community must accept either corrigible present classification or provisional present classification.
4. It cannot rationally combine confident present credit with infallible retrospective exclusion.

The argument does not assume that belief is directly voluntary or that people can choose perseverance on command. It is a claim about classification and evidence. Nor does it assume objective moral facts. It asks whether the community's own evidential practices are consistent with its own definitions.

5.1 A tautology cannot explain perseverance

Suppose the category "true Christian" is explicitly defined as "a Christian who perseveres until death." It follows analytically that no true Christian finally deconverts. But this result is true by vocabulary. It provides no evidence that an inward transformation caused perseverance, that present churches can identify the transformed, or that Christian practices are more reliable than alternatives.

The problem resembles defining "successful treatment" as "treatment followed by recovery" and then claiming that successful treatments always produce recovery. The statement is guaranteed but explanatorily empty. To show efficacy, one must classify treatments independently and compare outcomes. Likewise, a claim that genuine Christianity causes perseverance requires criteria for genuine Christianity that do not simply repeat the outcome.

6 Why the Boundary Retreat Is So Attractive

The word "Christian" is not a neutral label within Christian communities. It can carry salvation, family belonging, trust, identity, future hope, and an account of one's own past. A former insider can therefore threaten several propositions at once: that transformation is durable, that spiritual experience tracks truth, that the community recognizes its own members, and that the believer's present assurance is secure.

Berger and Luckmann's account of socially maintained reality helps explain why apostasy can disturb more than a proposition (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Shared practices, roles, stories, and repeated

conversation make a world feel stable. A former insider retains enough of that world to challenge it from within. Retrospective exclusion converts an internal defeater into an external misunderstanding.

Social identity theory likewise predicts pressure to protect the positive distinctiveness and continuity of an in-group (Tajfel and Turner 1979). If a respected insider leaves for reflective reasons, the group must represent itself as the kind of group from which informed, sincere people can depart. If the person was never truly inside, the group's self-description remains intact. The classification performs identity work whether or not anyone consciously designed it for that purpose.

Purity-boundary analysis adds a structural point. An apostate is difficult to place: once testimony, now objection; once an example of grace, now evidence of reversibility; once a trusted interpreter, now a disputed witness. Symbolic systems often restore order by relocating anomalous cases (Douglas 1966). The phrase "never truly one of us" removes the crossing by denying that the person ever crossed inward.

Religious groups also depend on credible commitment and stable signals. Costly practices can increase the believability of commitment and help sustain cooperation (Henrich 2009; Norenzayan 2013). Deconversion weakens the apparent reliability of those signals: if years of costly service do not identify durable belief, present signals become less decisive. Boundary retreat repairs that signal by declaring the prior performance counterfeit.

None of these explanations entails that Christianity is false. Social processes help maintain true and false beliefs. Nor do they establish that every defender is afraid, dishonest, or hostile. Their function is more modest: they show why a one-way classification can feel compelling even when its evidential standard is unstable. A reasoner should therefore inspect the rule, not trust the comfort it produces.

7 Former Insiders Are Evidence, Not Oracles

Deconversion testimony is often mishandled in opposite directions. Some believers treat the departure itself as evidence of prior insincerity. Some critics treat the former insider's report as decisive proof that the religion is false or harmful. Neither rule is defensible. Testimony is fallible, source-sensitive evidence. It gains or loses weight through specificity, consistency, corroboration, explanatory power, cost, and openness to correction.

Research on formerly religious people reinforces this plural picture. A cross-cultural profile analysis found substantial heterogeneity among the religiously unaffiliated and formerly religious rather than one psychologically uniform class (McLaughlin et al. 2022). Other work reports "religious residue": religious patterns of psychology and behavior can persist after people cease identifying with a religion (Van Tongeren et al. 2021). That persistence is relevant because it undermines the crude picture of an apostate who simply had no meaningful religious formation.

These studies do not certify every autobiography. They show why universal explanations such as pride, rebellion, superficiality, sexual license, or ignorance are empirically irresponsible without case-level evidence. People leave through intellectual doubt, institutional disillusionment, conflict, trauma, shifting identity, or combinations that change over time. A theory that assigns one hidden motive to every departure has confused theological convenience with psychological knowledge.

Epistemic vigilance is appropriate. Human communication depends on monitoring both sources and claims for possible error or deception (Sperber et al. 2010). But vigilance must be applied symmetrically. If a conversion testimony is trusted because it is detailed, costly, sustained, and behaviorally consistent, a deconversion testimony with those properties cannot be discounted merely because its conclusion points outward. The claim still requires examination. The speaker's current group identity is not a substitute for that examination.

Table 3: A symmetrical treatment of conversion and deconversion testimony.

Evidence feature	Conversion testimony	Deconversion testimony	Symmetrical rule
Narrative detail	May reveal a coherent path into belief.	May reveal a coherent path out of belief.	Detail raises inspectability, not automatic truth.
Personal cost	Sacrifice can show seriousness.	Loss of family, work, status, or certainty can show seriousness.	Cost is evidence against casual performance, not proof of the conclusion.
Changed conduct	Improvement may support causal claims about practice.	Continuing virtues or reduced distress may pressure claims of necessary decline.	Compare baselines, alternatives, duration, and selection effects.
Retrospective interpretation	A convert may redescribe the former self as blind or empty.	A deconvert may redescribe the former self as mistaken or pressured.	Memory is reconstructive in both directions; seek records and corroboration.

Anthropological work on evangelical experience also shows that apparently direct religious perception is cultivated through attention, interpretation, and practice (Luhmann 2012). This does not make the experience unreal. It makes formation part of the causal story. When a former practitioner later interprets the same processes differently, the disagreement should be studied rather than erased by status.

8 Ideals, Institutions, and Actual Cases

A defender may answer that Christianity should be judged by its founder or teachings, not by every person who adopts the label. There is truth here. An ideal can be clearer than its implementation, and a tradition should not be refuted by any single hypocrite. Yet the defense becomes overbroad when actual Christians count positively but disappear negatively.

Different claims require different evidence. A textual claim about what a canonical passage teaches should be tested by textual and historical methods. A claim that Christian institutions reliably form people requires institutional outcomes. A claim that the Christian deity transforms believers requires evidence connecting the alleged cause to transformed lives. A claim that Christianity is uniquely resistant to abuse or apostasy requires comparisons with actual groups. One cannot answer a causal claim entirely with an ideal definition.

This distinction is especially important when communities publicize positive cases. If hospitals, charity, reconciliation, courage, or durable marriages are evidence of Christian fruit, then recurring concealment, authoritarian control, shattered trust, and informed departure are at least relevant data. Their weight may differ. Confounders matter. Base rates matter. The point is not to balance a moral scorecard; it is to prevent selective sampling.

The paper does not invoke stance-independent moral facts to label an institution objectively evil. It uses the institutions' own stated aims and the practical effects they and their critics describe. A church that announces truthfulness, protection of the vulnerable, humility, and loving formation can be assessed for whether its practices predict those outcomes. Internal inconsistency and causal failure do not require moral realism.

9 Strong Objections and Their Costs

9.1 “The canon already says some apparent believers were never genuine”

Passages such as 1 John 2:19 are often read as teaching that final departure reveals prior nonmembership. That is a relevant theological premise, not a neutral observation. A defender may accept it. Doing so does not dissolve the dilemma. It makes completed perseverance central and thereby limits present certainty.

It also cannot establish the canon's reliability by counting present believers as obvious examples of the very status whose public detectability is disputed.

The correct reply is not that scripture is forbidden in a Christian argument. It is that the argument must expose its dependency. "The apostate was never genuine because scripture says genuine believers persevere" is an internal inference. It cannot be offered as independent public evidence that Christian transformation invariably perseveres without circularity.

9.2 "Regeneration is inward, and humans cannot see the heart"

If the decisive state is inaccessible, the community should state that limitation before using anyone as an example. It may reasonably recognize members for practical purposes while withholding certainty about inward status. What it cannot do is invoke invisible inwardness only after public signs become inconvenient.

The objection therefore supports a modest conclusion: social membership is observable; theological status is uncertain; public apologetic claims must be correspondingly restrained. It does not support confident success stories plus categorical retrospective erasure.

9.3 "False professions really occur"

They do. The prospective symmetry test is designed to allow them. Evidence of deliberate deception, consistent private rejection, instrumental affiliation, or failure to satisfy a clear prior criterion can defeat an initial classification. The test objects only when the departure itself does all the work.

A rule good enough to identify false professions should produce risk before the outcome. It may warn that a currently celebrated leader lacks an independently specified feature. It may classify a loyal but cynical opportunist as false. If it only identifies the people who later embarrass the claim, it is not a diagnostic instrument. It is a historical eraser.

9.4 "Bad representatives do not refute a doctrine"

Agreed. A corrupt mathematician does not refute mathematics. But evidence must match the claim. The mathematician's conduct is irrelevant to the truth of a theorem and relevant to claims about the profession's ethics. Likewise, a Christian's conduct may be irrelevant to whether a historical proposition is true and relevant to whether a spiritual mechanism reliably transforms character.

The boundary-retreat device gains power by switching claim types. When a life is inspiring, it is evidence of Christianity's truth and power. When the same kind of life collapses, conduct suddenly becomes irrelevant to doctrine. A defensible argument must specify in advance which claim the life bears on.

9.5 "Deconverts rationalize their departure"

Some do. So do some converts, lifelong believers, and critics. Human self-interpretation is fallible. The appropriate response is case-sensitive scrutiny, not a category-wide discount. Examine what the person believed, how the beliefs changed, which reasons were offered at the time, what costs were accepted, what records exist, and whether the story changes under challenge.

The accusation becomes circular when disbelief is itself treated as proof of a corrupt motive. Then no evidence could identify a sincere intellectual departure, because a sincere intellectual departure has been defined out of existence. That is precisely the boundary retreat.

9.6 "Pastoral reassurance matters more than public proof"

Pastoral speech and public argument can have different aims. A minister may protect frightened members from overgeneralizing one departure. That practical aim does not make an evidentially false statement true. Reassurance can say, "One case does not settle the doctrine; we do not know the person's inward

history; your own evidence must be assessed on its own.” It need not say, “The departure proves the person’s faith was never real.”

When pastoral reassurance is later used as apologetic evidence, its standard becomes public. Comfort does not authorize selective counting. The practical value of a belief and the evidence for its truth are distinct questions.

9.7 “Christianity is an ideal, not the sum of Christians”

An idealized theology is a legitimate object of philosophical analysis. But if the ideal is detached from every actual instance, it cannot also claim empirical confirmation from actual instances. The defender must choose what sort of claim is being made. An ideal can be internally coherent, textually grounded, or aesthetically powerful without being causally confirmed by selected biographies.

The escape becomes especially costly when “true Christianity” is always located elsewhere: not in historical churches, not in failed movements, not in abusive leaders, not in former believers, and not in current institutions when they are examined critically. A category with only ideal successes and no accountable population may remain devotionally important. It has ceased to be a publicly testable explanation of Christian history.

10 A Constructive Evidence Protocol

The paper’s criticism yields a practical method. A church, scholar, apologist, or critic can use it without pretending to read hearts.

1. **Name the claim.** Specify whether “Christian” refers to social membership, ideal conformity, theological status, or an evidential example. Do not slide between them.
2. **Fix criteria prospectively.** Record which signs warrant classification before the eventual success, scandal, or departure is known.
3. **Time-index confidence.** Say what the evidence warranted at the time. Later evidence may revise a reasonable judgment without making the earlier judgment dishonest.
4. **Apply symmetric skepticism.** Any reason that weakens the former believer’s earlier testimony must also weaken current testimony with the same features.
5. **Keep separate ledgers.** Track doctrinal truth claims, institutional effects, personal formation, and membership classification separately. A result relevant to one is not automatically relevant to all.
6. **State failure conditions.** Identify what would lower confidence in discernment, transformation, perseverance, or institutional reliability.
7. **Compare alternatives.** Ask whether ordinary socialization, identity protection, selection effects, or psychological change explains the pattern at least as well.
8. **Preserve testimony for inspection.** Treat conversion and deconversion accounts as evidence to be checked, not ammunition to be accepted or dismissed by allegiance.

This protocol permits disagreement. A defender may regard a scriptural perseverance doctrine as strongly supported. A critic may regard sociological mechanisms as more predictive. A community may adopt broad practical membership while reserving theological judgment. Progress occurs when the parties identify which evidence bears on which claim. “Never a true Christian” is not progress when it merely removes the case that generated the question.

Table 4: What responsible conclusions look like at different evidence levels.

Available evidence	Warranted statement	Overclaim	Required follow-up
Public participation only	“This person is a member of a Christian community.”	“The person’s inward status is certain.”	Distinguish practical recognition from theological certainty.
Long, costly, coherent practice	“The sincerity hypothesis has substantial support.”	“Later departure is impossible.”	Preserve records and allow future revision.
Later deconversion	“The prior classification and the reliability of its signs should be reassessed.”	“The departure alone proves prior fraud.”	Examine reasons, continuity, costs, and competing explanations.
Lifelong perseverance	“This completed life fits the perseverance criterion.”	“The criterion caused the outcome or validates every doctrine.”	Separate definition, prediction, cause, and broader worldview support.

11 Conclusion

This paper is an internal coherence and evidential audit of a common defensive practice. It is not a disproof of Christianity, a denial that false professions occur, or a claim that every deconvert reports the past accurately. Its target is narrower: the attempt to let actual Christians confirm Christianity while allowing no actual Christian to count against claims made about Christian formation, discernment, perseverance, or institutional fruit.

The core result is a dilemma. If present signs warrant confident claims of genuine Christianity, later counterevidence can rationally overturn those claims and must enter the worldview’s evidential record. If lifelong perseverance alone identifies the genuine, present believers have not completed the test, and their status is provisional. Either the category is corrigible or present recognition is uncertain. There is no rational third option in which insiders are confidently genuine while useful and retrospectively unreal when costly.

Social identity, dissonance reduction, purity maintenance, and commitment signaling explain why the forbidden third option is tempting. It secures the emotional and institutional benefits of confident recognition while protecting the ideal from failed cases. But comfort does not repair the accounting. A rule that credits every success and externalizes every failure does not reveal the resilience of Christianity. It reveals the resilience of the rule.

The polemical conclusion should therefore be stated without camouflage. A Christianity that owns hospitals, reconciliations, sacrifices, conversions, and saints as evidence must also own its apostates, institutional failures, broken predictions, and unreliable discernments as data. Their evidential weight can be debated; their automatic expulsion cannot be justified by the fact that they are inconvenient. If “true Christianity” is whatever remains after every countercase has been thrown out, then idealized Christendom has not survived a test. It has refused to take one.

A Formal Reconstruction of the Central Thesis

The formal notation makes the paper’s accounting rule explicit. It does not pretend that inward sincerity can be measured with mathematical certainty. Each formula is followed immediately by a plain-English explanation.

A.1 Symbols

- x : a person.
- t : the time of classification.

- u : a living person.
- $M_t(x)$: x 's public membership markers at time t .
- $C(x)$: genuine Christian status in the disputed theological sense.
- $D(x)$: later deconversion or permanent departure.
- $P(x)$: lifelong Christian perseverance.
- W_t : evidential warrant at time t ; $W_t[\phi]$ warrants claim ϕ .
- R : retrospective exclusion because of deconversion.
- S : equal evidential weight for evidence of the same kind.

A.2 Present evidential credit

$$M_t(x) \rightarrow W_t[C(x)].$$

Plain-English annotation. When a person displays the usual public signs of Christian commitment, the community uses those signs to support genuine status. The arrow records an evidential inference; it does not say that the markers logically guarantee the status.

This premise appears whenever current lives are cited as evidence of regeneration, reliable spiritual discernment, or Christianity's transforming power.

A.3 The retrospective rule

$$R: D(x) \rightarrow \neg C(x).$$

Plain-English annotation. If the person later leaves Christianity, the rule says the person was not genuine. The conclusion reaches backward: it does not merely classify the person now; it declares the earlier status unreal.

The rule can be a definition or a diagnosis. A definition fixes usage, but it does not show that an inward mechanism caused perseverance.

A.4 Perseverance as the decisive condition

$$C(x) \leftrightarrow P(x).$$

Plain-English annotation. The double arrow treats genuine status and lifelong perseverance as equivalent. Because a living person's life is unfinished, the condition that decides the classification is not yet fully observed.

Let u be a living person at time t . If completed perseverance is the only decisive public condition, then:

$$\neg W_t[P(u)] \wedge (C(u) \leftrightarrow P(u)) \rightarrow \neg W_t[C(u)].$$

Plain-English annotation. At time t , the community does not yet have a completed lifetime showing that the living person will persevere. If genuine status is defined entirely by that completed perseverance, then the available evidence cannot yet warrant certainty that the person is genuine. The conclusion is uncertainty, not a claim that the person is false.

The inference assumes that no independent route establishes $C(u)$ while perseverance remains the sole decisive public test. A defender who claims such a route should name it, explain how it is detected, and permit the same route to be evaluated in later counterexamples.

A.5 The symmetry condition

$$S : \quad \text{wt}_t(M_t(x) \mid \text{favorable outcome}) = \text{wt}_t(M_t(x) \mid \text{unfavorable outcome}).$$

Plain-English annotation. The expression wt means “evidential weight.” The same prayer, service, testimony, sacrifice, and apparent transformation should not receive strong weight when the person remains loyal and zero weight solely because the person later leaves. Later evidence may change the total judgment, but it does not change what the earlier evidence was.

Symmetry does not forbid updating. It forbids rewriting the earlier evidential value so that the favored conclusion never loses. New evidence can defeat an earlier judgment; it should not be treated as proof that no earlier evidence ever existed.

A.6 Legitimate revision

$$\begin{aligned} &W_t[C(x)], \\ &D(x), \\ &D(x) \text{ is independently relevant to } C(x), \\ &\therefore W_{t+1}[\neg C(x)] \text{ may replace } W_t[C(x)]. \end{aligned}$$

Plain-English annotation. Line one says the earlier evidence reasonably supported genuine status. Line two adds the later departure. Line three says the departure matters under a criterion that was independently supported, not invented for this case. The conclusion permits a revised judgment. A rational correction does not require pretending that the earlier classification had no evidence.

This is ordinary fallible inquiry. A doctor can make a reasonable diagnosis that later evidence overturns. The revision does not show that the original symptoms were imaginary; it shows that the evidence was defeasible.

A.7 Illegitimate boundary retreat

$$\begin{aligned} &M_t(x) \rightarrow W_t[C(x)], \\ &D(x) \rightarrow \neg C(x), \\ &D(x) \rightarrow \text{wt}_t(M_t(x)) = 0, \\ &\therefore \neg S. \end{aligned}$$

Plain-English annotation. Line one gives favorable cases present evidential credit. Line two applies the later exclusion. Line three goes further and says the departure makes the earlier signs count for nothing. The conclusion is that the rule is asymmetric: the later outcome changes the weight assigned to evidence that was already available before the outcome.

The third line is the distinctive defect. A later departure may defeat an inference, but it cannot make past participation, testimony, sacrifice, and communal recognition cease to be historical data. Erasing them hides the error rate of the original signs.

A.8 The central dilemma

Either $M_t(x)$ warrants confident present $C(x)$,
 or only completed $P(x)$ warrants $C(x)$.
 $M_t(x)$ warrants $C(x) \rightarrow D(x)$ can rationally update claims based on $C(x)$,
 $P(x)$ alone warrants $C(x) \rightarrow \neg W_t[C(x)]$ for living x ,
 $\therefore$ corrigible present classification $\vee$ provisional present classification.

Plain-English annotation. The first two lines state the choice. If current signs really support confident membership, a later countercase must be allowed to revise claims built on those signs. If only a completed lifetime decides membership, no living person has completed the test, so present classification remains provisional. The conclusion rules out confident credit now combined with automatic erasure later.

A.9 What the conclusion does not entail

$$\neg S \not\Rightarrow \neg \text{Christianity}.$$

Plain-English annotation. Failure of evidential symmetry does not prove that Christianity is false. It proves that this way of defending Christianity is unreliable. Other historical, philosophical, experiential, or theological arguments must be assessed on their own evidence.

The scope limit is important. The paper attacks an inference rule, not every member of a religion. It also does not infer motive from invalid procedure. A person can use an asymmetric rule sincerely. Sincerity does not make the rule reliable.

A.10 Worked example

Suppose a congregation recognizes Alex as a genuine Christian at time t . Alex has been baptized, leads study, prays publicly and privately, serves at personal cost, reports experiences understood as responses from the Christian deity, and is repeatedly presented by leaders as an example of transformation. In the notation, $M_t(\text{Alex})$ is strongly present, and the congregation asserts $W_t[C(\text{Alex})]$.

Years later Alex leaves after extended study and reports that the earlier devotion was sincere. The congregation may rationally examine memory, motive, doctrinal understanding, conduct, and new evidence. It may revise its theological judgment. But if its only reason for setting the earlier evidence to zero is $D(\text{Alex})$, the rule violates S .

$$\begin{aligned} &M_t(\text{Alex}) \wedge W_t[C(\text{Alex})], \\ &D(\text{Alex}), \\ &\neg \text{independent evidence of prior deception}, \\ &\therefore D(\text{Alex}) \text{ is not by itself sufficient to erase } M_t(\text{Alex}). \end{aligned}$$

Plain-English annotation. Alex's departure is new evidence and may change the final assessment. Yet without separate evidence that the earlier life was deceptive or failed a previously stated criterion, the departure alone cannot make the earlier evidence disappear. The responsible conclusion is that the original markers were fallible, not that they never existed.

If the congregation instead announces that only lifelong perseverance identifies the genuine, it can preserve the definition. It must then revise its earlier confidence:

$C(x) \leftrightarrow P(x) \rightarrow$ current recognition is provisional until the life is complete.

Plain-English annotation. This final line states the price of the perseverance definition. The community may use ordinary membership language for practical purposes, but it should not present any living believer as a certain instance of a status that only a completed life can reveal.

The worked case leaves multiple questions open. Alex may be wrong about Christianity. The congregation may possess additional evidence. The perseverance doctrine may have strong independent theological support. None of those possibilities licenses a double standard. The debate should move to the exposed evidence rather than disappear behind a boundary moved after the fact.

A.11 Validity, premise support, and possible defeat

The dilemma is deductively valid once its alternatives are read as the two public standards examined here. Present markers either warrant confident classification or they do not. If they do, later evidence can revise a genuinely supported claim and must remain in the markers' error record. If only completed perseverance decides the matter, confident classification of a living person exceeds the evidence.

Validity does not make every application sound. A defender can dispute whether a community gave present markers strong evidential weight, whether departure was the sole basis for reclassification, or whether independent evidence of deception exists. Those factual questions should be settled with membership standards, testimony practices, contemporary records, and case-specific evidence.

A stable third policy can also escape the dilemma, but it must pay its stated cost. A community might use "Christian" only as a social label, classify inward status provisionally, refuse to use current biographies as proof of regeneration, or adopt a present criterion with acknowledged false positives. Each option avoids inconsistency by surrendering certainty, apologetic credit, or retrospective immunity.

Bare possibility is not a defeat. Saying that Alex might always have been insincere does not show that Alex was insincere. Possibilities become evidence through discriminating reasons. The demand is exact: classify with the available evidence, state uncertainty honestly, and let the same rule expose the worldview to losses as well as gains.

A.12 Internal definition and public conclusion

The notation permits a strictly internal category. A community may define genuine Christianity by regeneration and final perseverance. That definition need not be contradictory, but it cannot silently inherit public support from a different, observable category.

If $C(x)$ is inward and inaccessible, $M_t(x)$ directly supports social membership and apparent formation, not certainty about $C(x)$. Using $M_t(x)$ to support $C(x)$ creates an evidential bridge. The bridge's mistakes must be reported with its successes, or it becomes a one-way gate.

A responsible record preserves time: it reports the classification at t , the markers that supported it, the later event, and the independent criterion that changed the assessment. This does not decide the person's inward life. It makes communal discernment corrigible.

The result is more accurate and less accusatory. A believer may acknowledge sincere participation while reserving theological status. A critic may count the case against infallible discernment without claiming that it settles Christianity. Symmetry disciplines both sides because neither may manufacture certainty from an outcome alone.

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