

Is Independent Catholicism Faithful?



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Scripture and Scope Note

Scripture references are provided throughout this book so that readers may return to the biblical texts and consider them in their larger context. Unless otherwise indicated, biblical passages are summarized or discussed rather than quoted directly.

Independent Catholicism includes many churches, jurisdictions, and theological perspectives. This book does not claim to speak officially for the Independent Catholic or Independent Sacramental movements, nor for any Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, Old Catholic, or other Christian communion. It offers a theological and pastoral reflection on faithfulness, obedience, authority, conscience, and communion.

Its purpose is not to dismiss the importance of ecclesiastical authority or to defend individualism. Rather, it asks the more fundamental question: **What is Christian obedience ultimately ordered toward?**

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PRAYER

Faithful and merciful God,

keep your whole Church faithful to Jesus Christ.

Purify our authority, our obedience, our conscience, and our freedom. Guard us from pride, fear, self-importance, and the desire to justify ourselves.

May we never confuse faithfulness to ourselves, our institutions, or our grievances with faithfulness to you.

Where we have wounded one another, bring healing. Where we have divided, teach us again the way of communion. Where authority has failed, restore it to service. Where conscience has become self-will, lead it back toward truth.

Make us humble enough to listen, courageous enough to speak, and faithful enough to follow wherever Christ leads.

Draw your whole Church more deeply into truth, holiness, communion, and love.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rev. Benjamin J. Stern is a priest, writer, and educator serving within the Independent Sacramental Movement. His ministry includes sacramental care, faith formation, theological writing, and the development of resources for Independent Catholic and Independent Sacramental communities. He is the author of several books exploring the history, theology, pastoral life, and future of the movement. His work seeks to encourage a more faithful, thoughtful, collaborative, and Christ-centered expression of independent sacramental Christianity.

only to Independent Catholics but to every Christian communion. The Church exists so that people may be drawn more deeply into the life of Christ and sent into the world as witnesses to the Gospel.

This is why obedience cannot finally be separated from faithfulness. Christian obedience is not ordered toward preserving authority for its own sake. It is ordered toward hearing and responding to God. Ecclesiastical authority serves that obedience when it teaches truth, preserves communion, forms disciples, protects the vulnerable, celebrates the mysteries of faith, and helps the people of God follow Christ. Christian freedom is likewise not ordered toward independence for its own sake, but toward faithfulness, holiness, service, communion, and love.

Independent Catholicism should therefore seek not merely to defend its claims but to become a credible witness to them. Its strongest defense will not be an argument about episcopal genealogy, canon law, or institutional freedom. It will be communities in which Jesus Christ is proclaimed, the sacraments are celebrated faithfully, authority becomes service, wounds are met with compassion, people grow in holiness, communion is sought, and the Gospel bears visible fruit.

That does not make every Independent Catholic community faithful. It gives every Independent Catholic community something toward which to strive. The question is therefore not only, **“Are Independent Catholics obedient?”** The deeper question is:

Are we becoming faithful?

1 The Question Behind the Question

There is a serious objection to Independent Catholicism. If Catholics are called to remain in communion with the Church and obedient to legitimate ecclesiastical authority, how can an Independent Catholic community claim to be faithful while existing outside the jurisdiction of the pope or another historic communion?

This question should not be dismissed. Christianity is not simply an individual relationship with God. Christ gathers a people, and the Church has sacraments, ministries, traditions, relationships, and real authority. Unity and obedience matter in the life of faith. If Christians may separate whenever they disagree with church authority, communion can quickly give way to fragmentation. Independent Catholics should take that concern seriously. Independence is not itself a virtue, and personal conviction does not automatically make resistance faithful.

Yet the opposite answer can also become too simple. If faithfulness is reduced to obedience once legitimate authority has been identified, separation can appear almost automatically to be unfaithful. Scripture, however, presents a more complicated picture. It values authority and obedience while also describing faithful people confronting rulers and religious leaders when they believe something greater is at stake.

The question, then, is not whether authority matters. The deeper question is: **What is authority for?**

Christian obedience has a purpose. It teaches us to listen beyond ourselves—to God, to Scripture, to the wisdom of the Church, and to others who may see what we do not. We can mistake our own preferences or desires for what faithfulness requires. Conscience therefore matters, but conscience must be formed, tested, and open to correction.

Authority must also remain accountable. A bishop, priest, council, or institution does not cease to stand beneath the Gospel simply because it possesses real authority. Christian leadership is entrusted for the sake of Christ’s people and Christ’s mission.

Authority is meant to teach, shepherd, protect, reconcile, and serve.

This book therefore begins with a conviction that will guide everything that follows: **Christian obedience is real and necessary, but obedience is ordered toward faithfulness to God. Ecclesiastical authority exists to serve that faithfulness, not to replace it.**

That principle applies to everyone. Independent Catholics cannot prove their faithfulness merely by appealing to conscience, apostolic succession, sacramental validity, or failures they have experienced in other churches. They too must place their decisions, structures, freedoms, and ambitions beneath the judgment of the Gospel. At the same time, those who defend established authority must ask not only whether authority was legitimate, but how it was exercised and whether it served the purposes for which Christian authority exists.

The deeper question is therefore larger than either authority or conscience considered alone:

What does faithfulness to God require of the Church, its leaders, and its members?

That question asks humility of everyone. It leaves room for obedience and conscience, authority and accountability, continuity and reform. It also leaves open the possibility that faithfulness may sometimes require submission and patience, and at other times correction, resistance, repentance, or reconciliation.

This book will not argue that authority is unnecessary or that separation should be celebrated. Nor will it assume that institutional belonging alone settles the question of faithfulness. Instead, it will return to Scripture, the life of Jesus Christ, and the experience of the Church to ask what Christian obedience is ultimately meant to serve.

Only then can we return fairly to the question with which we began:

Can Independent Catholicism be faithful?

community remains accountable to the Gospel it has received and is called continually to become what it proclaims.

Independent Catholics therefore cannot defend themselves merely by insisting that another church was wrong. If Independent Catholicism claims to be a faithful expression of Catholic life, that claim must be demonstrated in the communities it forms. Christ must remain at the center. Scripture must be received seriously. The sacraments must be celebrated faithfully. Tradition must be handed on as a living inheritance rather than merely preserved as an identity.

Leadership matters as well. Clergy must be formed responsibly, and episcopal and priestly authority must become service rather than status. Leaders should be accountable, capable of receiving correction, and committed to the good of those entrusted to them. Communities that welcome people wounded by other churches should care for those wounds with compassion without allowing injury to become the whole basis of their identity.

Independent Catholics must also ask whether they genuinely seek communion. Independence should not become a celebration of fragmentation. If communion can exist without centralized control, then Independent Catholic communities should work seriously to build relationships, cooperate across differences, repair divisions, and seek unity wherever possible.

Jesus teaches that trees are known by their fruits (Matthew 7:16–20). In John 15, fruitfulness comes from abiding in Christ, and Galatians 5:22–23 describes the fruit of the Spirit in terms such as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. These passages offer an important way of evaluating ecclesial claims. A community may possess ancient worship, apostolic succession, careful theology, or strong arguments about authority, but Christians must eventually ask what kind of life these things produce.

Are people becoming more loving, truthful, merciful, holy, and willing to serve? Are they growing in communion and becoming more deeply rooted in Jesus Christ? These questions apply not

exclusion or injury must not define itself only by those experiences. Healing cannot mean remaining permanently organized around what another church did wrong, nor should an Independent Catholic community reproduce the same patterns of authority that wounded those who came seeking refuge.

Healing should lead toward trust, responsibility, communion, and deeper life in Christ. The Church should be a place where wounded people are cared for without being told that their wounds automatically make them right, and where legitimate authority can be respected without being treated as incapable of failure.

Faithfulness does not always provide easy answers. It calls Christians to remain open to truth, repentance, mercy, and healing. For many Independent Catholics, that search is part of why they are here. The question is not whether their wounds justify everything that followed, but whether those wounds can become places where the grace of God leads toward greater faithfulness, deeper communion, and a more compassionate Church.

10 So, Is Independent Catholicism Faithful?

We can now return to the question with which this book began: **Is Independent Catholicism faithful?** The answer cannot simply be yes. Independent Catholicism can be faithful, but independence by itself proves neither faithfulness nor unfaithfulness. Separation from a larger communion may arise from serious discernment, legitimate pastoral needs, or convictions about what fidelity to the Gospel requires. It may also arise from pride, conflict, ambition, impatience, or an unwillingness to accept correction.

The same caution applies to institutional belonging. Communion with a historic church is deeply significant. Tradition, authority, accountability, and visible unity are genuine Christian goods. Yet institutional membership alone does not exhaust the biblical meaning of faithfulness. Every Christian

2 What Does It Mean to Be Faithful?

Before asking whether Independent Catholicism is faithful, we need to ask a more basic question: **What does faithfulness mean?**

Scripture begins that answer with God. Again and again, God is described as faithful. God keeps covenant and does not abandon the people God has called (Deuteronomy 7:9). The psalmist celebrates a faithfulness beyond human measure (Psalm 36:5). Paul grounds Christian confidence not in our own reliability but in the faithfulness of the God who calls us (1 Corinthians 1:9; 1 Thessalonians 5:24). Even when human beings fail, God remains faithful (2 Timothy 2:13), and Christians can live in hope because the One who promises can be trusted (Hebrews 10:23).

This gives us an essential distinction: **God is unfailingly faithful. The Church is called to be faithful.**

The difference matters. Faithfulness is not an automatic quality of an institution, office, or tradition. Bishops, clergy, parishes, councils, jurisdictions, and movements all depend upon the grace of God and remain accountable to the One they serve. Their ministries may be sacred and their authority real, but none can simply assume that everything they do is therefore faithful.

The same is true of Independent Catholics. Sincerity, apostolic succession, sacramental life, or dissatisfaction with another church do not by themselves prove faithfulness. Good intentions matter, but they do not remove the need for humility, discernment, and conversion.

Biblical faithfulness is richer than either institutional loyalty or personal conviction. It includes covenant, truth, worship, justice, mercy, holiness, communion, and obedience. The prophets refuse to separate worship from justice. Jesus joins love of God to love of neighbor. The apostles call Christian communities not only to right belief but to lives transformed by the Gospel. Faithfulness involves the whole shape of a life turned toward God.

For this reason, outward belonging or separation cannot by itself settle the question. Remaining within a church may express patience, humility, and fidelity. Separation may sometimes arise from pride or impatience, but it may also arise from a conviction that something necessary for faithful Christian life has been neglected. The action alone does not tell us everything.

Faithfulness therefore requires discernment. Christians must ask whether their convictions are being shaped by the Gospel. Leaders must ask whether their authority serves the people entrusted to them. Churches must ask whether their structures serve their mission. Independent Catholic communities must ask whether their freedom leads toward deeper life in Christ or merely preserves independence for its own sake.

These questions leave no one beyond examination.

The Church does not create the standard by which faithfulness is measured. It receives that standard from the God it proclaims and encounters it above all in Jesus Christ. The Church is faithful when its life becomes a credible witness to him.

This does not make obedience less important. It gives obedience its proper meaning.

Christian obedience is more than compliance with commands. At its deepest level, it is the willingness to listen and respond to God. Scripture, tradition, conscience, community, spiritual discernment, and ecclesiastical authority can all help Christians hear that call.

The question that follows is therefore unavoidable:

To what is Christian obedience ultimately ordered?

Before asking when authority may be resisted, we must first understand why obedience to the Church and its leaders has been regarded as a genuine Christian good.

3 The Case for Obedience

Christianity is not merely a collection of individuals trying to follow Jesus as each understands him. Christ gathers a people,

taken seriously. This is not an argument against authority. It is an argument about what faithful authority requires.

The same care is needed when speaking about conscience. Conscience is not simply whatever a person sincerely feels. Christian conscience must be formed through Scripture, prayer, tradition, reason, community, humility, and openness to the Holy Spirit. A conscience that refuses every challenge can become another form of self-will.

Yet conscience cannot simply be surrendered to another person. A bishop, priest, theologian, or institution can guide, teach, and correct conscience, but none can remove a Christian's moral responsibility before God. Obedience does not eliminate the need for discernment.

This is why the choice between authority and conscience is too simple. Both require formation and humility, and both can be distorted. Authority can become control, conscience can become individualism, tradition can become rigidity, and freedom can become self-justification. Even wounds can become identities that are difficult to release.

Christian discernment therefore asks a more demanding question: **How do authority, conscience, Scripture, tradition, reason, community, and the Holy Spirit together help us discern faithfulness to God?**

No single element should be isolated from the others. A person discerning whether to remain within a church should listen seriously to its teaching and pastoral leadership. A church confronting disagreement should listen seriously to the conscience, experience, and suffering of its members. Both should remain willing to ask whether they might be mistaken.

Galatians 6:2 calls Christians to bear one another's burdens. That offers an important image for ecclesial life. Communion is sustained not merely by asking people to carry burdens faithfully, but by helping one another carry them.

Independent Catholic communities bear a particular responsibility here. A church formed partly from experiences of

The question is therefore not merely whether primacy exists, but **what form of primacy most faithfully serves the communion and mission of the Church in the way of Christ.**

9 Conscience, Wounds, and the Search for Healing

Many Independent Catholics did not arrive at Independent Catholicism by studying theories of papal jurisdiction or debating the structure of the early Church. They arrived through experience. Some felt excluded from communities they loved. Some were wounded by clergy or church structures. Some discerned vocations their former communions could not recognize. Others came to believe that particular teachings or disciplines could no longer be reconciled with what faithfulness required, or they longed for sacramental worship, pastoral care, or liturgical traditions they could no longer easily find.

These experiences should neither be dismissed nor treated as automatic proof. A wound does not make every conclusion drawn from it correct. Pain can deepen understanding, but it can also narrow judgment. At the same time, the legitimacy of an authority does not make the wounds caused under that authority unimportant.

Scripture takes failures of religious leadership seriously. Ezekiel 34 condemns shepherds who fail to care for the flock. Jesus criticizes leaders who place heavy burdens upon others without helping to bear them (Matthew 23:4). By contrast, he invites the burdened to find rest in him (Matthew 11:28–30), and the image of the shepherd seeking the lost sheep presents leadership as active care rather than passive expectation (Luke 15:1–7).

The Church therefore has responsibilities toward those who struggle, question, suffer, or leave. It is not enough to ask why someone failed to remain. The Church must also ask whether that person was heard, whether burdens became unbearable, whether pastoral care was offered, and whether serious concerns were

forms a Church, entrusts ministries to that Church, and calls believers into visible communion with one another. For that reason, authority has always mattered in Catholic Christianity.

The New Testament does not present the Church as a community without structure. Different gifts and ministries belong to one body (1 Corinthians 12), and leaders are entrusted with teaching, shepherding, preserving unity, and caring for the faithful. Hebrews 13:17 calls Christians to obey those who watch over them. Authority, then, is not simply an unfortunate necessity. It can be understood as one of the ways Christ cares for the Church.

Peter holds a distinctive place in the Catholic understanding of that authority. Matthew 16:18–19 associates Peter with the rock and the keys. Luke 22:31–32 gives him a responsibility to strengthen the other disciples, and John 21:15–17 entrusts him with the care of Christ's flock. Roman Catholic theology understands these passages as pointing toward a continuing Petrine ministry of unity in the Bishop of Rome.

If that understanding is correct, communion with Rome cannot be treated as merely administrative. The papal office would carry genuine theological significance as a visible service to the unity of the universal Church. In the same way, bishops are not simply managers of religious institutions. In historic Catholic Christianity, the episcopate belongs to the Church's apostolic ministry of teaching, sanctifying, and shepherding.

Acts 15 offers a powerful biblical image of shared authority. When a major dispute threatens the early Church, the believers do not simply separate according to personal conviction. Apostles and elders gather, debate, listen, discern, and reach a common judgment. The Church seeks unity through communal discernment rather than private decision alone.

This helps explain why obedience has traditionally been regarded as a Christian virtue. Christians can misunderstand Scripture, misread their motives, or assume that personal conviction is sufficient. Authority, tradition, and community remind us that faith is received within a people larger than

ourselves and that humility sometimes requires allowing ourselves to be corrected.

Obedience also protects communion. If every serious disagreement becomes sufficient reason to leave, reject leadership, or establish another jurisdiction, visible unity becomes difficult to sustain. A Christianity in which every person or community becomes its own final authority risks turning freedom into fragmentation.

Independent Catholics should take this concern seriously. The existence of multiple jurisdictions raises legitimate questions about accountability, perseverance, reconciliation, and the limits of individual judgment. A community that values independence must still be able to explain how its bishops and clergy are accountable and how disagreement is handled without making separation the first response.

The strongest case for obedience therefore rests on something deeper than institutional control. It rests on the conviction that Christ intends a visible Church, that communion requires real relationships of authority and accountability, and that unity sometimes asks Christians to remain in relationship even when disagreement is painful.

From this perspective, obedience can be an act of humility. It can protect believers from self-deception and protect communities from personalities, ambitions, and private interpretations that would otherwise pull them apart. Catholicity cannot mean preserving ancient worship while rejecting every obligation of communion.

The case for obedience is therefore serious. Independent Catholics should not dismiss it.

But one question remains:

Does Christian obedience mean that every exercise of legitimate authority must always be obeyed?

Scripture itself makes that question more complicated.

still asking how that primacy should relate to local bishops, regional churches, councils, and the wider episcopate.

An ancient description of the Roman Church as “**presiding in love**” offers one suggestive image. Primacy might be understood not only in terms of jurisdiction, but also as a ministry of witness, unity, coordination, and service to communion. Many Independent Catholics could recognize something important in such a vision without denying the historic significance of Rome.

Roman Catholic theology offers an important response. It need not claim that every later form of papal authority existed fully developed from the beginning. It can understand the universal role of the Bishop of Rome as a legitimate development of the Petrine ministry as the Church grew and reflected more deeply upon the needs of universal communion.

That argument should not be dismissed simply because later structures differed from those of the earliest centuries. Christian doctrine and ecclesial practice develop over time. Historical development by itself proves neither faithfulness nor unfaithfulness.

The question can therefore be stated more precisely: **May Christians recognize a genuine Roman primacy while questioning whether universal and immediate jurisdiction over every local church is the only faithful expression of that primacy?**

For many Independent Catholics, this is a more helpful question than whether one is simply “for” or “against” the pope. It allows the historic importance of the Bishop of Rome to be taken seriously while also preserving the conciliar, episcopal, and local dimensions of catholic life.

Primacy, like every form of Christian authority, must finally be understood according to the purpose it serves. Does it strengthen communion, protect the faith, encourage reconciliation, and help the Church remain united in Christ? Does it serve the people of God?

The goal is not to assign blame as quickly as possible. It is to understand what communion requires and how it might be protected, repaired, and, where possible, restored.

Christian unity is precious. That is precisely why the burdens people carry cannot simply be ignored.

8 What Kind of Primacy?

Independent Catholics do not need to deny that the Church of Rome held a significant place in ancient Christianity. Peter and Paul were closely associated with Rome, Roman bishops sometimes became involved in disputes beyond their own local church, and ancient Christians could speak of the Roman Church with particular honor. Any serious discussion of Independent Catholicism should acknowledge this history rather than suggest that Roman primacy appeared without earlier roots.

The more important question is therefore not simply whether Rome possessed primacy, but **what kind of primacy belongs to the Bishop of Rome?**

Roman Catholic theology understands the Petrine ministry as continuing in the pope and serving the visible unity of the universal Church. From this perspective, papal authority is not merely honorary or symbolic. It includes real authority within the Church and belongs to the structure Christ intended for Christian communion. That claim deserves to be taken seriously.

At the same time, the ancient Church was deeply episcopal and conciliar. Local bishops exercised substantial responsibility for their churches, regional synods addressed disputes, councils played an important role in discernment, and clergy and people often participated meaningfully in the selection of bishops. The life of the Church was held together through relationships among local churches, bishops, regions, and councils rather than through one administrative center alone.

This historical complexity allows a more careful question. Christians may acknowledge a genuine Roman primacy while

4 When Authority Must Be Confronted

Scripture values obedience, but it does not present obedience to human authority as absolute. Again and again, faithful people find themselves in conflict with rulers, priests, and institutions that possess real authority. The Hebrew midwives refuse Pharaoh's command because obedience would require participation in evil (Exodus 1:15–21). Nathan confronts David even though David is the anointed king (2 Samuel 12:1–15). Elijah challenges Ahab (1 Kings 18), Amos refuses to be silenced by the priest Amaziah (Amos 7:10–17), and Jeremiah repeatedly speaks against political and religious leaders despite the cost to himself.

These stories do not teach that authority is meaningless. They teach that authority is not ultimate. The prophets do not present themselves as autonomous individuals who answer to no one. Their resistance is grounded in a prior obligation to God. Kings remain accountable to covenant, and religious office does not place anyone beyond the demands of truth, justice, and faithfulness.

This distinction is essential. Christian resistance is not simply the freedom to disregard authority whenever obedience becomes difficult. Scripture gives no reason to assume that personal conviction is automatically superior to communal judgment. Conscience can be mistaken, prophets can be false, and religious language can be used to justify self-interest just as appeals to obedience can be used to protect power.

The New Testament brings this tension into especially clear focus in Acts 5. The apostles are commanded to stop proclaiming Jesus, but they refuse because they understand that command to conflict directly with the mission entrusted to them by God (Acts 5:27–32). Their response is important, but it should not become a simple answer to every dispute over church authority.

The apostles are not claiming that disagreement releases Christians from obedience or that individuals become the final judges of what God requires. They believe that a human command has come into conflict with an obligation they have

received from God. This gives us a principle that is both powerful and demanding: **Christian obedience is never absolute when directed toward another human being or institution. Only God may claim absolute obedience.**

Yet another principle must stand beside it: **Claims of divine obligation must be tested rather than merely asserted.**

Otherwise, an appeal to God can become an easy way to avoid accountability. The person who resists authority must ask whether that resistance truly arises from faithfulness or from fear, resentment, pride, or personal preference. Those who exercise authority must likewise ask whether they are protecting the Gospel or merely protecting their own position. Neither side can assume that sincerity alone proves faithfulness.

This is especially important for Independent Catholics. It would be too easy to appeal to prophetic resistance whenever another church questions separation or disobedience. Not every disagreement is prophetic, and not every departure is necessary. Independent Catholics must be willing to examine their own motives and decisions as seriously as they examine the actions of the authorities they have resisted.

At the same time, legitimate authority cannot be treated as though legitimacy makes every command faithful. Scripture does not allow us to make that assumption. Human authority remains accountable to God, and religious authority does not become divine simply because it is sacred. The question is therefore not only whether authority exists, but whether its exercise remains faithful to the purpose for which that authority was given.

This does not make discernment easier. It makes the responsibility greater. Those who obey, those who resist, and those who command all stand beneath the judgment of God. Christian faithfulness therefore cannot be reduced either to unquestioning submission or to individual freedom. It requires a deeper obedience: a willingness to listen for the will of God even when doing so challenges our preferences, our institutions, or our certainty.

seriously what happens when legitimate needs, wounds, vocations, or calls for reform are repeatedly ignored.

Communion requires more than asking people to remain. It requires listening, patience, truthfulness, pastoral care, and a willingness to respond when members of the body are suffering. **Authority cannot demand communion while refusing the responsibilities that make communion possible.**

The New Testament does not present the early Church as free from conflict. Paul confronts Peter over conduct he believes is harming the integrity of the Gospel (Galatians 2:11–14). Acts 15 describes a serious dispute addressed through discussion, discernment, and shared judgment. Later in the same chapter, Paul and Barnabas experience such a sharp disagreement that they separate in their missionary work (Acts 15:36–41). These stories do not celebrate division, but they remind us that communion must be tended, protected, and sometimes repaired.

Unity does not mean the absence of disagreement. It means learning how to face conflict without assuming that every disagreement is rebellion or that every exercise of authority is beyond question.

This is especially important when considering Independent Catholicism. Some communities have emerged from unnecessary conflict, personality disputes, or an unwillingness to remain accountable, and Independent Catholics should be honest about that history. Other communities have grown from situations in which people believed that serious pastoral needs, questions of conscience, calls to ministry, or appeals for reform were not being heard. Those histories should not be dismissed simply by saying that those who left should have remained obedient.

When communion breaks, faithfulness requires examination on every side. Those who separate must ask whether they pursued patience, reconciliation, and reform as far as they reasonably could. Those who remain in authority must ask whether they listened, served, and responded faithfully to the people entrusted to their care.

whether its life points beyond itself toward Christ and the Kingdom he proclaimed.

Faithfulness therefore cannot be reduced to institutional boundaries alone. Structures, communion, and authority matter, but they are servants of a greater mission. The Church is faithful when its life becomes a credible sign of the Kingdom it announces and helps people grow more deeply into the truth, mercy, holiness, justice, reconciliation, and love of God.

The Church must therefore ask not only whether its authority has been preserved, but whether the mission of Christ is being served.

7 When Communion Breaks

Christian division is tragic. Jesus prays that his followers may be one (John 17), and the New Testament repeatedly calls Christians toward communion, reconciliation, and mutual love. Schism should never be romanticized as though separation were itself a sign of courage or faithfulness.

Scripture also shows, however, that division can have more than one cause. First Kings 12 tells the story of Rehoboam, the son of Solomon. The people ask him to lighten the burdens placed upon them, and the older counselors urge him to listen and respond with service. Instead, he follows harsher advice and promises to make their burden heavier. The kingdom divides.

The story does not reduce the division to a simple failure of subjects to obey their legitimate king. Rehoboam's refusal to listen becomes part of the explanation for the rupture. This leads to an important distinction: **A division may be tragic without all responsibility for the division resting upon those who separate.**

That principle must be applied carefully to the Church. It does not mean that every person who leaves is justified, that every institutional decision is abusive, or that disagreement itself gives permission for separation. Christians can leave for prideful, impatient, or mistaken reasons. Yet churches must also take

If all human authority remains accountable to God, the next question becomes unavoidable:

What should Christian authority look like when it is exercised faithfully?

5 Authority in the Way of Jesus

Jesus does not abolish leadership. He transforms it.

The Gospels repeatedly challenge ordinary assumptions about power. In Mark 10:42–45, Jesus contrasts the domination practiced by rulers with the kind of leadership expected among his disciples. Luke 22:24–27 makes the same point when the disciples argue about who is greatest. In the community of Jesus, greatness is measured not by rank but by service.

John 13 gives this teaching a visible form. Jesus washes the feet of his disciples and takes the place of a servant. The one Christians confess as Lord shows that authority in the Church must be understood through the pattern of Christ himself.

This does not mean that leadership becomes weak or that difficult decisions disappear. Jesus teaches, corrects, commands, and sends. Christian authority is real, but its purpose is not domination. It exists to shepherd, teach, protect, reconcile, sanctify, and serve the people of God.

Matthew 23 offers an important warning. Jesus recognizes the religious authority associated with the teaching office of his day while also condemning leaders who place heavy burdens upon others and fail to live according to the standards they impose. The problem is not simply that authority exists. It is that authority can be exercised in ways that contradict its purpose.

This leads to an important distinction: **Authority is not invalid simply because it is imperfect, but legitimate authority may still be exercised unfaithfully.**

A bishop may truly possess authority and still exercise it poorly. A priest may hold a legitimate office and still fail the people entrusted to his care. A church may possess ancient structures and sacred traditions while still needing repentance and

reform. Recognizing such failures does not require denying the reality of ecclesiastical authority.

It does require us to ask more than whether authority is legitimate. If Christian authority is shaped by Christ, we must also ask how it is exercised and what it produces. Does it serve or dominate? Does it protect the vulnerable, seek reconciliation, and strengthen the Church's mission? Or does preserving authority itself become the primary concern?

These questions apply equally to Independent Catholic leaders. Independence does not remove the need for accountability. Communities with fewer institutional structures may need to be especially attentive to how authority is exercised. A bishop who rejects domination from elsewhere must not reproduce domination within a smaller church.

Christian authority is therefore measured not only by where it comes from, but also by whether it reflects the character and mission of Jesus Christ. The Church must ask whether its leaders help those entrusted to them grow in holiness, communion, and life in God.

Authority fulfills its purpose when it becomes service in the way of Christ.

6 The Church and the Kingdom of God

Jesus begins his public ministry by proclaiming the Kingdom of God (Mark 1:14–15). He teaches his disciples to pray for that Kingdom to come and for God's will to be done on earth (Matthew 6:10). The center of his message is therefore larger than any one institution, office, or structure.

This does not make the Church unimportant. Christ gathers a people and entrusts that people with ministries, sacraments, relationships, responsibilities, and a mission. Christians are not called to follow Jesus as isolated individuals. They are joined to one another in worship, service, teaching, communion, and love.

The Church is therefore essential to Christian life, but it is not identical with the Kingdom of God. It is called to be a sign,

servant, witness, and instrument of God's reign. Through its worship, sacramental life, proclamation of the Gospel, care for those in need, and work of reconciliation, the Church is meant to offer a foretaste of the life God desires for the world.

This distinction protects us from two opposite errors. The first is to say that institutions do not matter because only Jesus matters. That overlooks the fact that Jesus forms a community with a shared life and mission. The second is to identify the institutional Church so completely with the Kingdom of God that loyalty to the institution becomes almost indistinguishable from loyalty to God. The Church is holy because of God's grace, but its structures remain human, historical, and always in need of conversion.

The Church proclaims the Gospel, but it also lives under the Gospel it proclaims. Its bishops remain disciples, its councils remain accountable to truth, and its traditions must continue to direct people toward Christ. Its structures have value insofar as they help the Church worship faithfully, preserve communion, form disciples, serve those in need, and carry forward the mission entrusted to it.

This leads to an important principle: **The Church has authority because it serves the mission of Christ. The mission of Christ does not exist to preserve the authority of the Church.**

That principle does not weaken ecclesiastical authority. It gives authority its proper purpose. When the Church teaches, it should serve truth. When it governs, it should protect communion and seek the good of the people entrusted to it. When it disciplines, it should seek justice, healing, and restoration. When it preserves tradition, it should hand on a living faith that leads people more deeply into Christ.

The same standard applies to Independent Catholic communities. Freedom from a larger institution does not itself prove faithfulness. Independent churches can become as concerned with preserving their own identity, authority, or structures as any larger communion. Every church must ask