

Biblical Membership: Participation, Accountability, and Presence[Acts 2:42 NKJV](#)

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Here is a great question that I just received: What does the bible have to say about non-attending church members that have all the rights and privileges of church membership?

Here is my answer:

From a biblical and ecclesiological standpoint—particularly within historic Baptist and congregational polity—the idea of **non-attending members retaining full rights and privileges of church membership** is difficult to justify. Scripture consistently ties *membership* to *active participation, accountability, and submission to spiritual oversight*, not merely to one's name on a roll.

Here is a structured biblical analysis.

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Clarifying Emphasis:

A church that abandons doctrine, fellowship, the ordinances, or prayer is not merely “less active”—it has reversed the very pattern of New Testament devotion.

1. Church Membership in Scripture Is Relational, Not Nominal**Biblical Truth:**

The New Testament never presents church membership as a passive or symbolic status.

[Acts 2:42 NKJV](#)

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2. Scripture Commands Faithful Gathering**Biblical Truth:**

Persistent non-attendance is treated as spiritually dangerous, not neutral.

[Hebrews 10:25 NKJV](#)

²⁵ Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as *is* the manner of some, but exhorting *one another*, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.

Biblical Membership: Participation, Accountability, and Presence (4)**3. Rights Flow from Responsibilities in the Body of Christ****Biblical Truth:****Function precedes privilege.****1 Corinthians 12:7 NKJV**⁷ But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit *of all*.**4. Church Authority and Accountability Require Presence****Hebrews 13:17 NKJV**¹⁷ Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you.**Reverse-Clarity Statement — Hebrews 13:17 (NKJV)**¹⁷ If believers refuse to submit to godly leadership and reject accountability, then leaders cannot watch over their souls with joy, but only with grief—and the people themselves suffer spiritual loss as a result.

The following is a clear, ministry-ready list built around the axiom “Shepherding assumes proximity.” Each item reflects realities that cannot occur at a distance and implicitly require presence, relationship, and accountability—biblically, pastorally, and practically.

Diagnostic Question:

Who can biblically obey you, submit to you, and be watched over by you—because you are actually present in their lives?

Definition of Proximity

Proximity refers to closeness in space, relationship, or presence that allows for interaction, awareness, influence, and responsibility. Proximity is not merely physical nearness; it includes relational accessibility and functional engagement—being close enough to know, observe, and respond.

In leadership, discipleship, and shepherding contexts, proximity is what makes care, accountability, and guidance possible.

Five Distinct Examples of Proximity**1. Shepherd and Sheep**

A shepherd must remain among the flock to guide, protect, and correct. Distance results in vulnerability and neglect.

Biblical insight: “Shepherd the flock of God which is among you” (1 Peter 5:2).

2. Physician and Patient

A doctor cannot diagnose or treat from afar. Appointments, examinations, and follow-ups require proximity for healing to occur.

3. Parent and Child

Parenting demands presence. Moral formation, discipline, and nurture happen through daily, close interaction, not occasional observation.

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4. Teacher and Student

Learning deepens when a teacher is accessible—able to observe comprehension, correct error, and encourage growth. Distance reduces formation to information.

5. Pastor and Congregation Member

Spiritual oversight assumes relational nearness. A pastor cannot “watch over souls” without shared life, mutual knowledge, and availability.

Biblical anchor: Hebrews 13:17 assumes leaders who are present enough to give an account.

Summary Statement

Proximity creates responsibility. Distance dissolves accountability.

Where there is no proximity, there can be no meaningful care, correction, or shepherding.

Shepherding Assumes Proximity — 20 Realities

1. Spiritual Oversight

Souls cannot be watched over from afar (Hebrews 13:17).

2. Knowing the Condition of the Flock

Shepherds must *know* their sheep, not just count them (Proverbs 27:23).

3. Discipline and Correction

Loving correction requires relationship, not anonymity (Matthew 18:15).

4. Pastoral Care in Suffering

Pain is shared face-to-face, not at arm’s length (Romans 12:15).

5. Discipleship

Teaching is relational before it is informational (Matthew 28:19–20).

6. Accountability

Mutual submission requires mutual presence (Galatians 6:1–2).

7. Protection from False Teaching

Wolves are recognized by proximity, not distance (Acts 20:28–30).

8. Encouragement and Exhortation

Stirring one another up requires gathering together (Hebrews 10:24–25).

9. Spiritual Authority

Authority is exercised among a people, not over spectators (1 Peter 5:2–3).

10. Trust

Trust is built through consistent presence, not occasional contact.

11. Prayer with and for the Flock

Shepherds pray *with* sheep, not merely *about* them (James 5:14).

12. Shepherding by Example

Examples must be seen, not streamed (1 Corinthians 11:1).

13. Correction of Sin Patterns

Patterns are observed over time, not discovered at a distance (Hebrews 3:12–13).

14. Church Discipline

Discipline presupposes belonging and participation (1 Corinthians 5:12).

15. Unity in the Body

Unity grows through shared life, not remote affiliation (Ephesians 4:16).

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16. Spiritual Maturity Assessment

Growth is discerned relationally, not statistically ([Colossians 1:28](#)).

17. Bearing Burdens

Burdens are carried shoulder-to-shoulder ([Galatians 6:2](#)).

18. Love that is Tangible

Biblical love moves toward people, not away from them ([1 John 3:18](#)).

19. Joyful Shepherding

Joy flows from shared life, not detached leadership ([Hebrews 13:17](#)).

20. Faithful Witness to the World

The church's testimony is embodied, local, and visible ([John 13:34–35](#)).

Summary Statement

Shepherding assumes proximity because Christianity is incarnational, not virtual.

Authority, accountability, care, and growth all require presence.

Distance may transmit information, but it cannot shepherd souls.

Here is a reverse-clarity version that states the same truth by negating the assumption of proximity. This format works especially well for teaching, confrontation of modern church assumptions, and leadership training.

Reverse-Clarity Version

“If Shepherding Does *Not* Assume Proximity...then”

1. Spiritual oversight can be exercised without knowing the people involved.
2. Souls can be watched over without presence or relationship.
3. Correction can occur without trust or shared life.
4. Pastoral care can be offered without entering suffering.
5. Disciples can be formed through content alone.
6. Accountability can exist without mutual visibility.
7. False teaching can be detected without observing lives.
8. Encouragement can flourish without gathering together.
9. Authority can function without relational credibility.
10. Trust can be built through distance and inconsistency.
11. Prayer can replace personal ministry rather than accompany it.
12. Leadership by example can occur without being seen.
13. Sin patterns can be discerned without ongoing interaction.
14. Church discipline can occur without church involvement.
15. Unity can exist without shared life.
16. Spiritual maturity can be measured without personal knowledge.
17. Burdens can be borne without proximity or sacrifice.
18. Love can remain abstract and still fulfill biblical commands.
19. Shepherding can be joyful without shared obedience and struggle.
20. The church can faithfully witness to the world without embodied community.

Biblical Membership: Participation, Accountability, and Presence (4)**Concluding Clarification**

****If these statements were true, shepherding would be administrative, not pastoral; virtual, not incarnational; managerial, not biblical.**

Scripture rejects every one of these assumptions.

Shepherding requires proximity.**

Below is a **Hebrews 13:17**–aligned reverse-clarity framework. Each point is tethered directly to a phrase in the text and exposes what must be assumed **if proximity were not required**—thereby sharpening the biblical force of the passage.

Hebrews 13:17 (NKJV) — Anchor Text 7 parts

“1) Obey those who rule over you, 2) and be submissive, 3) for they watch out for your souls, 4) as those who must give account. 5) Let them do so with joy 6) and not with grief, 7) for that would be unprofitable for you.”

Reverse-Clarity Alignment

What **Hebrews 13:17** Would Mean *If Shepherding Did NOT Assume Proximity*

1. “Obey those who rule over you...”

- Obedience could be rendered without relationship.
- Authority could be exercised without presence.
- Leadership could be claimed without access to people’s lives.

Clarification:

Biblical obedience presupposes known leaders among known people.

2. “...and be submissive...”

- Submission could occur without trust.
- Submission could be theoretical rather than lived.
- Submission could exist toward leaders who are never present.

Clarification:

Submission requires relational nearness, not distant acknowledgment.

3. “...for they watch out for your souls...”

- Souls could be watched over without being seen.
- Spiritual danger could be identified without proximity.
- Shepherds could guard what they never observe.

Clarification:

Watching implies visibility, familiarity, and ongoing presence.

4. “...as those who must give account...”

- Leaders could give account for people they do not know.
- Accountability could be abstract rather than specific.
- Shepherds could answer to God for souls they never shepherded.

Clarification:

Accountability demands real people, real lives, real involvement.

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5. “Let them do so with joy...”

- Joy could exist without shared life.
- Shepherding joy could come from administration alone.
- Shepherds could rejoice without relational fruit.

Clarification:

Joy flows from walking with people, not managing names.

6. “...and not with grief...”

- Grief could occur without emotional investment.
- Leaders could suffer spiritually over people they barely know.
- Distance could prevent pastoral sorrow.

Clarification:

Grief presupposes love born of proximity.

7. “...for that would be unprofitable for you.”

- Shepherding effectiveness would be optional.
- Distance would not harm the flock.
- Disengagement would carry no spiritual cost.

Clarification:

Scripture states plainly: detached shepherding damages the sheep.

Summary Teaching Statement

****Hebrews 13:17** only works in a church where shepherds and sheep share life together. You cannot obey leaders you do not know, submit to shepherds you never see, or be watched over by those who are never near. Shepherding assumes proximity—because souls are not shepherded at a distance.**

Diagnostic Question:

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