

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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[Acts 2:42 NKJV](#)

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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](#)

⁴² And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.

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.

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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.

5. Church Authority and Accountability Require Presence (Repeat with different emphasis)

Biblical Truth:

Shepherding assumes proximity.

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.

Introduction: Presence is the Necessary Context for Authority and Care

One of the defining tensions of the modern church is this: **we want the benefits of belonging without the responsibilities of presence**. We live in an age shaped by distance—**remote work, virtual relationships, on-demand services, and personalized control**. Authority, in this cultural climate, is often viewed with **suspicion**, and **accountability** is treated as an **infringement on personal freedom**. Yet Scripture presents a radically different vision of authority—one that is **pastoral, relational, and inseparably tied to presence**.

Modern-Day Illustrations

1. Doctor With No Appointments

A physician cannot monitor health without regular visits. **Absence removes accountability.**

2. Sheep Outside the Flock

A sheep that wanders off is not under protection but exposure. **Authority is protective, not oppressive.**

3. Employee Who Refuses Supervision

Claiming workplace benefits while rejecting oversight results in **termination—not affirmation**.

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Biblical Membership: Participation, Accountability, and Presence (5)**Reverse-Clarity Statement — Hebrews 13:17 (NKJV)**

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.

Expanded Reverse-Clarity (Teaching Form)

- Where submission is absent, spiritual oversight becomes impossible.
- Where leaders are resisted rather than trusted, shepherding turns from joyful care into burdensome grief.
- When accountability is rejected, the congregation—not the leaders—bears the spiritual cost.

One-Sentence Teaching Summary

Rejecting godly oversight does not produce freedom; it produces loss—loss of care, loss of protection, and loss of spiritual profit.

Introduction: Presence is the Necessary Context for Authority and Care

Once again, please allow me to repeat what I previously stated: One of the defining tensions of the modern church is this: **we want the benefits of belonging without the responsibilities of presence.** We live in an age shaped by distance—remote work, virtual relationships, on-demand services, and personalized control.

COVID-19 did not weaken the church—COVID 19 revealed the weaknesses of the church.

Authority, in this cultural climate, is often viewed with **suspicion**, and **accountability** is treated as an **infringement on personal freedom**. Yet Scripture presents a radically different vision of authority—one that is **pastoral, relational**, and inseparably tied to **presence**. The biblical model of church leadership **does not assume anonymity, casual affiliation, or sporadic engagement**. It assumes **proximity**.

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.**

Hebrews 13:17 grounds church authority in a sobering reality: pastors and elders “**watch out for your souls**” and must “**give account**” before God. That kind of spiritual oversight **cannot be exercised at a distance**. Shepherding, by its very nature, **requires nearness—knowing people, walking with them, seeing patterns, and responding in real time to danger and drift**. This is **not about control**; it is about **care**. Authority in the church is **not positional dominance** but **protective responsibility**. And accountability is **not punishment** but **pastoral stewardship**. But both collapse when presence is removed.

Illustration 1: The Doctor with No Appointments

Imagine a patient who insists on being considered under a doctor’s care but never **schedules appointments, never submits to examinations, and never follows up**. That patient may

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appreciate the *idea* of having a physician, **but in reality, no diagnosis can be made, no treatment prescribed, and no warning issued.** Health deteriorates—**not because** the doctor is negligent, **but because** absence makes care impossible. In the same way, church leadership **cannot guard souls they never see.** Spiritual oversight requires **regular contact, shared rhythms, and observable life patterns.** Absence removes **accountability**, and without **accountability**, care becomes **theoretical** rather than **real.**

Illustration 2: Sheep Outside the Flock

Scripture's favorite metaphor for God's people is **not accidental.** Sheep are vulnerable creatures. They do not survive by independence but by **staying close to the flock and under the watchful eye of the shepherd.** A sheep that wanders off is not **exercising freedom**; it is placing **itself in danger.** Authority in this image is **not oppressive—it is protective.** The rod and staff are **not symbols of tyranny but tools of guidance and rescue.** When believers **remove themselves** from gathered life, **they step outside** the sphere where shepherding can function. **The problem is not that the shepherd no longer cares; it is that the sheep is no longer present to be cared for.**

Illustration 3: The Employee Who Refuses Supervision

Consider an employee who demands **full benefits, protection, and compensation but refuses performance reviews, ignores management, and works on their own schedule.** No organization functions that way. **Accountability** is the price of **participation.** Refusing oversight while claiming benefits is **not independence—it is entitlement.** The same logic applies in the church. Spiritual leadership carries responsibility, but that responsibility presupposes mutual engagement.

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.**

Hebrews 13:17 assumes a relationship **where leaders know the people and the people are known by their leaders.** Authority without presence is meaningless, and presence without accountability is dysfunctional.

Illustration 4: Security Cameras with No Live Feed

A security system disconnected from its live feed offers the illusion of safety without actual protection. In the same way, calling pastors “**watchmen**” or “**shepherds**” while removing them from real access to lives **reduces oversight to symbolism.**

Biblical leadership operates in real time, not retrospectively.

Framing the Biblical Truth

This is why Scripture repeatedly emphasizes “**among you**” language. The biblical concept of “**among you**” appears over 60 times in the New Testament alone.

- Elders are made overseers *among the flock* (**Acts 20:28**).

Acts 20:28 — Overseers must “**shepherd the church of God.**”

Acts 20:28 NKJV

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²⁸ **Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.**

- Shepherds are to lead those *entrusted to them*, not at a distance ([1 Peter 5:2-3](#)).

[1 Peter 5:2-3](#) — Shepherds lead those who are **among** them.

[1 Peter 5:2-3 NKJV](#)

² **Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly;**

³ **nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.**

- Wisdom requires knowing the *state* of the flock ([Proverbs 27:23](#)).

[Proverbs 27:23 NKJV](#)

²³ **Be diligent to know the state of your flocks, *And* attend to your herds.**

All of this assumes **presence, participation, and relational proximity**.

Transition to the Text

[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.**

[Hebrews 13:17](#) confronts a modern misconception: that submission is optional and accountability is negotiable. **In Scripture, submission is not blind obedience, but willing cooperation with those charged by God to care for souls. And accountability is not loss of freedom, but the means by which spiritual joy, protection, and growth are preserved. Church authority and accountability do not function in abstraction. They require presence. To remove presence is to dissolve the very framework God designed for the care of His people.**