

## Membership Is Submission

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 2:7–12; Hebrews 13:17

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As a pastor, I know I will have to give an account for the people under my leadership (Hebrews 13:17). Every pastor faces the same burden for the men and women under his care. But what good is a shepherd if the sheep won't submit to his authority? In an age of unprecedented ecclesiastical consumerism, how can a pastor lead, serve, or even *know* an inconsistent, fluctuating flock?

Active involvement in and submission to a local church body is crucial if we're going to live up to God's plan and pattern for the church. As we've already seen, the idea of Christians floating free between multiple congregations and never committing to one church body is *completely* foreign to the New Testament. That kind of untethered independence cuts you off from the authority the Lord established through His church.

Just what that authority looks like is the cause of much controversy in the church today. Some pastors exercise illegitimate authority over their churches, with a level of involvement in their members' lives that borders on abusive or dictatorial. It's not the pastor's role to tell his people where they should live, where they should work, whom they should marry, or exert that kind of control in other areas of their lives.

The only *biblical* authority a pastor has comes from the Word of God and the Holy Spirit working through his teaching in the lives of his flock. In effect, he's not a source of authority himself, but a vessel of it from the Lord to His people. That's the authority God's people need to submit to—the work of the Spirit through the faithful, consistent teaching of God's Word.

And how should believers respond to that kind of authority? That's the question the writer of Hebrews was addressing in 13:17. "Obey your leaders and submit to them; for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you."

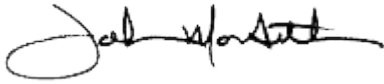
It's a tremendous grief to try to shepherd a rebellious flock. Watching over the people of God is no easy task to begin with. We're called to train, disciple, support, and serve you. We're called to guard your purity, and to lend insight and exercise oversight with you. We're also called to exhort, warn, admonish, reprove, rebuke, and discipline in the application of God's Word in your lives—all for the sake of your spiritual growth.

That's hard enough with believers who are eager and engaged in the process. It's virtually impossible with people who won't be faithful to the flock and who want nothing to do with your leadership.

If you have a faithful pastor or church leader who exemplifies the qualities of a shepherd, let him know how much you appreciate his labor on your behalf (cf. 1 Thessalonians 5:12). It will be a great encouragement to him to know he's making a spiritual difference in your life.

And if you're a believer who rejects the biblical authority of the local church and won't submit to your pastor or church leaders, you need to do a careful, thorough examination of your heart. What's behind your rebellious spirit? What sin are you harboring that's keeping you from submitting to godly authority? Are you sure you're truly saved at all?

The authority of the church isn't harsh, personal, or oppressive. It's parental, building you up and working for your benefit (1 Thessalonians 2:7-12). Don't be foolish enough to reject that kind of biblical influence and authority in your life. Seek it out and submit to it in church membership.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John MacArthur". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and a long, sweeping underline.

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