

The Heresy of Spiritual Covering

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Heresy is term to describe “an opinion or doctrine not in line with accepted teaching of a church; the opposite of orthodoxy.” (Holman Bible Dictionary) The reason we must deal with heretical issues is that they lead people into bondage and doctrinal error. This is certainly the case with the concept of spiritual covering. The idea of having a person as a spiritual covering is rooted in the lack of willingness to submit (commonly labeled as rebellion) to the only covering the Church has – Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit who He sent.

What is commonly labeled as “spiritual covering” today refers to the idea that a minister of the Gospel should be submitted to someone or at least an organization that provides ongoing oversight and accountability for both the person and their ministry. It is generally believed that a person who does not have a covering runs the risk of running into spiritual problems and/or that doctrinal errors will creep into their message and ministry. Simply put, this heretical concept does not exist in the Bible, yet it has crept into the Church and holds those that have been called by the Holy Spirit to minister in captivity and bondage. This so-called doctrine seems to have a life of its own, perpetuated by the desire of men to control what only the Holy Spirit was called to control.

In the following verses we see Jesus emphasizing the abiding work of the Holy Spirit to guide the Church (including pastors and elders!) into truth as well as giving them discernment to test messages to determine if they are from God. The only true covering the Church has is Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit He sent. Man-made “coverings” are nothing but superficial attempts to control rather than disciple followers of Jesus Christ and those that He raises up by His Holy Spirit as leaders in His Church.

John 14:16–17 (NASB95)

¹⁶ “I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; ¹⁷ *that is* the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not see Him or know Him, *but* you know Him because He abides with you and will be in you.

John 14:26 (NASB95)

²⁶ “But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you.

John 15:26 (NASB95)

²⁶ “When the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, *that is* the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify about Me,

John 16:13–15 (NASB95)

¹³ “But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come. ¹⁴ “He will glorify Me, for He will take of Mine and will disclose *it* to you. ¹⁵ “All things that the Father has are Mine; therefore I said that He takes of Mine and will disclose *it* to you.

We see the work of the Holy Spirit in the calling and sending of Paul and Barnabas in Acts 13:2-4. Some would argue that the church at Antioch was the covering for Paul and Barnabas, however, the emphasis the Scripture places on the Holy Spirit makes it clear that He was their covering, not the church leaders. The Holy Spirit was the one directing (Acts 13:2) and Acts 13:4 demonstrate that He was the One who called them and He was the One who sent them out, not man. In addition, Paul declares in Galatians 1:1 that he was, “an apostle (not sent from men, nor through the agency of man, but through Jesus Christ, and God the Father, who raised Him from the dead).

At the Council in Jerusalem, we see Peter reminding the brethren that, “God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe (Acts 15:7b NASB).” Again, the Lord working independently of the approval of men allowed the truth of the Gospel to be preached to Cornelius and his household with results. Furthermore, in the context of Acts 18, we do not see Paul submitting to Peter’s authority to be his spiritual covering. Rather we see a council of leaders that the Lord raised up that came together in a spirit of yielding one to another, which demonstrates the true character of humility. Leaders in the church today that attempt to lord over those that sense the call to the ministry do so in direct disobedience to the Lord’s command concerning leaders (Luke 22:24-26).

Paul’s instruction to the church at Corinth was to, “Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ” (I Cor 11:1), providing the “follower” the ability to reject or accept a mentor. Mutual accountability (side to side) is demonstrated by Matt 18:15-17, rather than promoting a top-down model, similar to what is used in corporations, which is currently pervasive in the Church today and in direct opposition to the Lord’s vision for the Church (Luke 22:24-26).

We are all called to hear and follow the voice of God, which Paul boldly proclaims in Galatians 3:26 (NASB95), “For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus”, which hearkens back to Joel 2:28. Dr. Jon Ruthven puts it plainly, “the impulse of the Spirit is to empower everyone”. The Holy Spirit is in charge of the Body of Christ – He calls, equips, and provides revelation, sends AND covers.

So now we come to basic order in the Church. How could a local church operate with everyone claiming they heard from the Lord on a particular issue? Clearly, one person must make a final decision about the direction a group of leaders feels the church is being called to and that Person should be the Holy Spirit, not the head elder (which we call a pastor) or even a group of elders. Elders bear the responsibility of hearing the voice of the Lord and doing His will as revealed by the Holy Spirit within the framework of Scripture. In this article I am attempting to address the issue of those that the Spirit is calling and raising as ministers of His gospel to His Church at large.

When I minister at a local church, I enter into a mutually yielded relationship with a pastor or group of elders. I work alongside the shepherd who has responsibility for that assembly of believers. We enter into a relationship of **mutual submission** under the covering of the Holy Spirit co-laboring in the work of the Lord. It would not be appropriate for me to submit the ministry the Lord has charged me with to a pastor or group of elders any more than they should submit their pastoral ministry or the church the Lord has entrusted to them to me.

Are pastors/head elders called to move in God-given authority to minister to the flock of Jesus Christ? Without a doubt! But they were never called to lord over those who the Jesus Christ has called. They must give room and yield to the Holy Spirit as He does His work in the Church. The Body of Christ is healthy when it is allowed to flow with the Spirit through each of its members.

Ministers are dependent on the Lord to, "...be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding (Col 1:9)." Paul makes it clear that all Christians, including ministers, must have revelation of His will (Ph 1:9-10, Col 1:10). In many cases those who attempt to control or suppress ministers the Lord is raising up, move in the sin of presumption, believing they have all the answers. Their natural, unsanctified aversion to risk and desire to see everything done in order, becomes a tool in the devil's hand to divert the will of the Lord, instead of allowing the will of the Lord to be done on earth as it is in Heaven. Ministry without revelation is the devil's playground; follow that idea to its logical conclusion and we begin to understand why the Church in America is not only powerless but toxic.

Some of the problems that have been caused by itinerant ministers in churches arise from the fact that pastors in some cases are not in relationship with those they let in the door, to say nothing of not being in relationship with the Holy Spirit who called them in the first place. Doing so, they run a high risk of experiencing serious problems rather than positioning themselves for a blessing. The natural result has been that pastors and elders have become experts in moving in the spirit of suspicion, which is the only alternative you have when you no longer hear the voice of the Spirit or you attempt to judge a ministry without discerning the spirit behind the ministry. Judging a ministry in the flesh never works, and when you do so you run the risk of locking the door to the Holy Spirit. This flesh-laden habit pattern brings staleness to the Body of Christ that leads to decay.

We must hear and see what the Spirit of God is doing and move with Him. If the only response a pastor has to an itinerant ministry is, “No!” or the lame statement, “I’ll pray about it”, there is little doubt they have probably missed an opportunity the Spirit was bringing along the way. Leaders must hear from the Spirit. If ministers don’t have the gift of discernment or lack wisdom, then they must confess it to those who can pray for them. Leaders dare not lock the door to the Holy Spirit for others when they have lost their way!

I remember a pastor having concerns that I was praying with one of “his” members, telling them, “I’m not saying that there is anything wrong with Mark, but...just be careful. I really don’t know him”. This is a classic example of control being exerted by a pastor working out of a spirit of suspicion. It is the work of the flesh at best. **Furthermore, if you don’t know a person or their ministry, then you will have to be intentional about getting to know that person.** Spreading suspicion among brethren is a sin, plain and simple. It is the same as sowing discord and division; God hates it. See Proverbs 6:19.

I and the ministry the Lord has entrusted to me are submitted to the Holy Spirit. I follow His leadings and His promptings within the framework of Scripture. What about you? A certificate or diploma on the wall doesn’t mean that a person is certified by Heaven and it certainly doesn’t mean that they have ears to hear or eyes to see. Just because a person displays ordination documents doesn’t mean they have any meaningful relationship with those that signed them! Let’s get real about who is and who is not “certified” and “under spiritual authority” and stop playing church games designed to keep the Body of Christ in bondage to man’s plans, purposes and systems.

For all of the so-called “safety systems” that man has devised in the Church to help pastors in their ministry, we see approximately 1500 pastors each month leave the ministry. We also see families of pastors and other ministers destroyed because of sin who are ordained and who are “accountable and submitted” to man. If that isn’t bad enough, the Holy Spirit isn’t flowing in the Church and the lack of the operation of spiritual gifts and callings is deplorable, while pastors lament over the lack of leaders and workers in the church.

I would “submit” this – the reality is that the Church is losing on all fronts, attempting to use man’s strategies and systems in place of following the Holy Spirit. We must recognize the failure of the course we have charted. If that wasn’t bad enough, we are destroying the ministries of those truly called of God, or at best we throw stumbling blocks in front of them, keeping them from doing what Almighty God has called them to. Woe unto us for controlling and being suspicious of them, rather than standing alongside and encouraging those He has called to run the course set before them.

I tell you it is time to repent from this evil and turn back to the Lord and welcome His Holy Spirit back into our lives, as well as the ministries and churches that He has entrusted to us. If we do not submit to His leadership...if we do not submit one to another and yield to basic Biblical truths, then I would “submit” that **we are the reason**

the Church is not experiencing revival. We must change our style of leading the flock of God and begin cultivating, recognizing and supporting the ministries that He is raising up in this day. We must lay down our lazy spirit of suspicion and take on His Spirit of discernment, loving those that are called to serve Jesus and feed His flock with fresh bread and Living Water. Until we do, we will not see the revival that we have prayed for. Prayer alone will not bring the outpouring of the Holy Spirit! We must change our ways and repent of quenching, grieving and disobeying the Spirit of Jesus Christ!

Mark Biteler