

## **The Heresy of Spiritual Covering**

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If you are going to hit something, you might as well hit it hard. Heresy is used to describe “an opinion or doctrine not in line with accepted teaching of a church; the opposite of orthodoxy.” (Holman Bible Dictionary) The reason why 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 man as a spiritual covering is rooted in the lack of willingness to submit 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 this type of covering risks encountering personal spiritual problems and/or having doctrinal errors 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 who 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 men’s desire to control what only the Holy Spirit was called to control!

In the following verses, we see John emphasizing the abiding work of the Holy Spirit, which would guide the Church into truth and help them test messages to determine whether they were from God. The only true covering the Church has is Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Man-made “coverings” are nothing but superficial attempts to control, rather than to disciple, followers of Jesus Christ and those He raises up as leaders in His Church. Jesus raises up leaders. It is a work of the Spirit, not the work of the flesh, as we see in Acts 13:2-4.

1 John 2:19–20 (NASB95)

- 19 They went out from us, but they were not *really* of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but *they went out*, so that it would be shown that they all are not of us.
- 20 But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and you all know.

1 John 4:1 (NASB95)

- 1 Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.

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 demonstrates 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 is “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 who attempt to lord over those who 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, “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 pervasive in the Church today and is 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.

So now we come to the basic order in the Church. How could a local church operate with everyone saying they “hear from the Lord” and that they should move in a certain direction? Clearly, one person must make the final decision about the direction the group of leaders believes the church is being called to take. 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 Spirit within the framework of Scripture. But in our case, we are talking about those that the Spirit is calling and raising up to be ministers to the Church at large.

When I minister at a local church, I submit my work to and work alongside the shepherd responsible for that assembly of believers. We enter into a relationship of mutual submission under the covering of the Holy Spirit and the ministry He has called **both** of us to. It would not be appropriate for me to submit the ministry the Lord has entrusted me with to a pastor any more than he should submit his pastoral ministry or his church to me.

Some of the problems caused by itinerant ministers in churches arise from the fact that, in some cases, pastors are not in a relationship with those they let in the door. 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 follow and move with a spirit of suspicion, which is the only alternative you have when you no

longer hear the voice of the Spirit or when you attempt to judge a ministry without discerning the spirit behind it. Judging a ministry in the flesh never works, and most of the time, if you do, you risk locking the door to the Holy Spirit. We must hear and see what the Spirit of God is doing and move with Him. If the only response you have to an itinerant ministry is “No” or the lame statement, “I’ll pray about it”, you’ve probably missed an opportunity the Spirit was bringing. Leaders must hear from the Spirit. If you don’t have the gift of discernment or you don’t have enough wisdom, then confess it to those who can pray for you. Don’t lock the door to the Holy Spirit for others when you have lost your 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 a pastor exerting control over an individual in a spirit of suspicion. 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.

The ministry the Lord has entrusted to me, and I, are submitted to the Holy Spirit. We follow His leadings and His promptings within the framework of Scripture. How about you? I am accountable to good and trusted brothers in the Lord who are laymen or in full-time ministry in one form or another. How about you? A certificate on the wall doesn’t mean that you are certified by Heaven, and it certainly doesn’t mean that you have ears to hear or eyes to see! Just because you display ordination documents doesn’t mean you have any real relationship with those who 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, his plan, his purposes, and his systems.

For all the so-called “safety systems” that man has devised in the Church to help pastors walk this walk of faith, we see 1,700 pastors leave the ministry each month. We 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. 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 by God, or, at best, we throw stumbling blocks in front of them, keeping them from doing what Almighty God has called them to do. 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 of this evil, turn back to the Lord, and welcome His Holy Spirit back into our lives, as well as into the ministries and churches 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 to cultivate, recognize, and support the ministries 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 who

are called to serve Jesus, and to 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!

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