

Articles and Sermons :: UNCOVERING the "COVERING DOCTRINE" - C MacGrath

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(Posted by Andrew Strom in his email newsletter.

NOTE: A very balanced look at an often-abused topic. We would be interested in your comments on the below article, my friends.

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UNCOVERING the "COVERING DOCTRINE" -by Cheryl MacGrath.

In a number of the denominations I've been involved in, including at leadership level, a "doctrine of covering" was taught and accepted. And for many, many years, I never questioned this teaching. After all, everyone believed it; the leadership upheld it, so it must be right, right? It is only as the Holy Spirit has impressed me to study the scriptures more deeply on this teaching that I've had to come to terms with the fact that He NEVER originated it! In His infinite grace, He chose to wait patiently for a time when the Spirit of Truth would become dearer to me than the traditions of men.

The teaching on "covering" goes like this. Everyone needs to be accountable to someone who is spiritually his or her superior. This someone may be your cell group leader, the head of a church department or your senior pastor etc. In turn, these leaders receive covering from someone further up the line, for instance a denominational leader or a "recognised" apostle. The necessity for this covering is based on the belief that believers need to be safeguarded from falling into error and/or sin. So covering is provided by those who are more spiritual than we to protect us from such error. At the top of this pyramid of covering there is quite often a well-known and recognised "name" but the chances of meeting or having any kind of relationship with that person if you are at the bottom of the pyramid are fairly slim. Currently, there are several networks offering this kind of covering to those in some form of church leadership or ministry, more often than not for an annual fee. The annual fee usually provides for the running of the network, and conferences where you can fellowship with others under your particular brand of covering. You may also be denied entrance from one of these networks because you don't have the appropriate credentials.

One of the strange things about this "covering" teaching is that rarely is anyone asked about their spiritual covering, until they step outside their particular church, denomination or network. However, the minute a believer shows signs of having something important to share with the wider Body of Christ, suddenly all and sundry are interested primarily in that one important question: "Who are you covered by?" It all sounds pretty reasonable except for one problem - it's NOT FOUND in scripture. In fact, the early church was taught to rely on the inner anointing to discern the spiritual source of potential ministers. (1 John 2:20; 1 John 4:1)

So, where did this idea originate that believers need to be "covered" in order to serve God and minister within Christ's Body? Are you, like many others, living your Christian life under the shadow of this fear that without "covering" you dare not minister, preach, pray or do a myriad of other things you're called to do by the Spirit of God, because you will somehow be ministering without protection?

The purpose of this article is to shed some light on this issue based on scriptural truth. To begin with, though, we need to understand that this need to be covered by a perceived spiritual authority, and the scriptural instruction to submit ourselves to God's delegated authorities, are NOT necessarily one and the same thing. Furthermore, New Testament authority as demonstrated by Jesus and the first apostles, is servant-hood - authority, upholding, strengthening, reinforcing and overseeing the Body from BENEATH, not DOMINEERING, CONTROLLING and RULING from ABOVE. Therefore, it is vital in examining this issue that we begin from a correct understanding of Biblical submission and Biblical authority.

'LET THIS MIND be IN YOU'

"Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God; but made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross." (Phil. 2:5-8)

The current mindset we carry in much of the church concerning submission is quite unrelated to the submission taught and demonstrated by Jesus and the early apostles. There is a desperate need to return to the same mind that was in Christ Jesus. The scripture tells us that though He was equal with the Father, Jesus **CHOSE** to submit Himself, He **CHOSE** to humble Himself, He **CHOSE** to obey. This is the key to Biblical submission, and the model laid down for us by both the Father and the Son.

Submission is firstly a choice; a choice that can only ever be made by the giver. Biblical submission can never be demanded or forced. That kind of relationship is subservience, not submission. Jesus chose to subject Himself to the Father, but the Father "so loved the world that He **GAVE** His only begotten Son." Sacrificial giving and sacrificial submission are married to each other. In the Spirit, you cannot have one without the other. If you try, you will invariably end up with control, dependence and abuse rather than humility, interdependence and grace.

The New Testament concept of submission, or subjection, is one of a totally voluntary attitude of giving, of yielding one's preference and deferring to another. In this way, Jesus as a child was subject to His parents, yet the scriptures record that He did not even consult them when He was "about His Father's business." (Luke 2:49,51)

"IT SHALL NOT be SO AMONG YOU"

"Obey your spiritual leaders and do what they say. Their work is to watch over your souls, and they know they are accountable to God. Give them reason to do this joyfully and not with sorrow. That would certainly not be for your benefit." (Hebrews 13:17, NLT)

"But Jesus called them to Himself and said to them, "You know that those who are considered rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you shall be your servant. And whoever of you desires to be first shall be slave of all." (Mark 10:42-44)

"Jesus got them together to settle things down. "You've observed how godless rulers throw their weight around," he said, "and when people get a little power how quickly it goes to their heads." (Mark 10:42 The Message)

There is no question that the scriptures instruct each one of us to submit to God's delegated authority. It is the understanding and the application of that authority we often stumble over. The Bible records that Jesus taught the twelve this Kingdom authority as they walked along the road to Jerusalem. His face had been set toward the Cross, and it is certain He was keenly aware of the short time He had left with them. Perhaps He was conversing with His Father about what were the most important lessons He could impart to them during the time that was left. We know that He heard them disputing over who among them was the best "leadership material". Perhaps Peter, having not long before witnessed Jesus' transfiguration, thought that gave him special status. Perhaps James and John felt they were more likely candidates for rulership than impetuous Peter. Shortly before, they had asked Jesus to give them special places of honor in His Kingdom. Whatever had started their dispute, Jesus certainly knew how to end it!

"Whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave....." (Matt. 20:27).

The Lord was speaking to a group of people who had grown up under the rule of the Roman Empire. The Romans exercised their authority through forced subjection and harsh cruelty. In fact, the literal translation of the words Jesus used in reference to Roman rule mean "to be under the power of" and "to be subdued." Despite having witnessed Jesus using a very different kind of authority and power, the disciples had not yet understood exactly what He would require of them. The Romans were, in the political sense, their masters. Yet here was Jesus stating that to exercise the authority He was going to invest in them they would need to become slaves to one another, and not masters. One might safely assume these weren't words any of them particularly wanted to hear that day!

Kingdom authority has nothing to do with titles, positions, educational qualifications or reputation. Kingdom authority is g

ranted by the Lord according to the measure with which He can trust us to wield it with humility. The greatest authority in the kingdom is reserved for His bondslaves.

WHAT about ACCOUNTABILITY?

In today's church system we have confused the word "covering" with the need for accountability. Consequently many are holding themselves accountable to people with title and position, regardless of whether or not they are developing an ongoing transparent relationship with that person. In the Kingdom, it is not possible to be truly accountable to those with whom we are not actively growing in relationship. How can I be trusted to call you to account righteously if I don't love you in Christ? How can you love me with Christ-like love and not call me to account?

Paul was able to correct the Corinthians because he had true relationship with them. He had travelled over them, nurtured them, wept for them and rejoiced with them. Therefore he was able to reprove them, for their edification and not for their destruction. (2 Corinthians 13:10)

When we turn to the scriptures for guidance on this issue of accountability, a startling fact confronts us. The New Testament mentions accountability ONLY in terms of the believer towards God. The scripture teaches that we will give accountability TO GOD ALONE in the following areas:

- *stewardship (Luke 16:2)
- *ourselves (Rom. 14:12)
- *fruit (Phil 4:17)
- *what we do in the flesh (1 Pet. 4:5)
- *leaders shall give account for the souls they watch over (Heb. 13:17)

What then, DO the scriptures teach about how believers, as members of the corporate Body of Christ, are to relate to one another?

"... all of you be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility, for God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble." (1 Peter 5:5)

In Galatians Chapter Two we read of a journey Paul took to Jerusalem. He states that he went up "by revelation", that is, at the instigation of the Holy Spirit, in order to confirm that the gospel he had been preaching was approved by the eldership of the Jerusalem church. He goes on to state that "those who seemed to be something, whatever they were, it makes no difference to me," had nothing to add to his teachings. He further adds that when James, Cephas (Peter) and John perceived the grace God had shown him, he was given the "right hand of fellowship."

At the instigation of the Holy Spirit, Paul had subjected himself to the Jerusalem eldership, including Peter, for the purpose of accountability. One may safely assume that Peter, having spent around three years day and night with Jesus, and highly regarded by the early believers, held very great authority in the church. Paul, however did not ask Peter to cover him. Instead, he did not hesitate in calling Peter to account when Peter was later swayed to go back on his word by the fear of men (Gal. 2:11-14). Bear in mind this is the same Peter who stated "We ought to obey God rather than men." (Acts 5:29)

These men understood the nature of relationship through the Holy Spirit; ALL of you be submissive to one another, ALL of you be clothed with humility. Each of us is accountable to one another, whatever our function in the Body, whether apostles, teachers, deacons or helpers. This is the church Christ is building.

To say that we are demonstrating accountability to a person or group of people we may briefly rub shoulders with at a meeting once or twice a week, or perhaps once or twice a year, is ludicrous. True accountability is about how we express Christ in us - our lifestyle, our character and our integrity in families, jobs and church community. This cannot be measured outside Godly relationships, and without a humble willingness to be in subjection one to another. Each one of us needs to seek out and submit ourselves to those in the Body the Lord has placed close to us to provide that accountability, regardless of their position, title or function. Each one of us needs to be willing, in humility and service, to provide that same accountability base for others in the Body. This applies to leadership equally as it does to the newest, most inexperienced member of the Christian community.

Sadly, what we see today in so much of the church, is a frenzied jockeying for position under the supposedly protective umbrella of some ministry name or reputation, in order to prove ourselves "covered". "WHO COVERS YOU?" has become one of the most frequently asked questions among Christians, and too often it is the deciding factor in assessing a ministry's integrity or otherwise. Consequently, an unsatisfactory answer to that question in some church circles can label you "outside the camp" and almost certainly not to be trusted. Christians are judging each other's worth and relationship with God on this issue of covering, and using it to justify self-righteousness and spiritual elitism.

In Part Two of this study we will talk about what is at the root of this distorted doctrine, and the clear choices that lie before us in order to be free from it.

Part TWO

".....then the LORD will create above every dwelling place of Mount Zion, and above her assemblies, a cloud and smoke by day and the shining of a flaming fire by night. For over all the glory there will be a covering." Isaiah 4:5

"He shall cover thee with his feathers, and under his wings shalt thou trust: his truth shall be thy shield and buckler." Ps. 91:4

IT'S about HIS NAME

"Now it happened on one of those days, as He taught the people in the temple and preached the gospel, that the chief priests and the scribes, together with the elders, confronted Him and spoke to Him, saying, "Tell us, by what authority are You doing these things? Or who is he who gave You this authority?" (Luke 20:1-2)

As we see from this portion of scripture, the question "who covers you?" is not new. The chief priests, scribes and elders were not simply asking Jesus where His supernatural power came from. More than that, they wanted a NAME. "Who is he?" Come on, tell us Jesus, who is the scribe, who is the rabbi, who is the prophet who covers you? And no more of that over-spiritualised talk about your Father. We want the name of the person who said you could do these things!"

The apostle Paul confronted a similar problem in the Corinthian church.

"For it has been declared to me concerning you, my brethren, by those of Chloe's household, that there are contentions among you. Now I say this, that each of you says, "I am of Paul," or "I am of Apollos," or "I am of Cephas," or "I am of Christ." Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptised in the name of Paul?" (1 Cor. 1:10-13)

The Lord is jealous over us concerning His Name. We were bought and paid for by His Blood, and His Name is the only Name by which we are to identify ourselves. When believers choose to find their identity in another name other than His, the Spirit is grieved and His Name is dishonoured.

IT'S ABOUT the FLESH

"Don't ever let anyone call you 'Rabbi,' for you have only one teacher, and all of you are on the same level as brothers and sisters. And don't address anyone here on earth as 'Father,' for only God in heaven is your spiritual Father. And don't let anyone call you 'Master,' for there is only one master, the Messiah. The greatest among you must be a servant." (Matthew 23:8-11, NLT)

The Corinthians were apparently separating into factions according to whom they considered was the most authoritative teacher. They were following after men, and for that reason Paul took issue with them. Further in his letter he goes on to challenge them by describing this kind of mindset as carnal and fleshly rather than spiritual:

"For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men? For when one says, "I am of Paul," and another, "I am of Apollos," are you not CARNAL?" (1 Cor. 3:1-4)

Finally, he instructs them:

"Therefore let no one boast in men. For all things are yours: whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas, or the world or life or death, or things present or things to come—all are yours. And you are Christ's, and Christ is God's." (1 Cor. 3:21-23)

The Corinthians had become so obsessed with the attributes of certain teachers they were idolising them. They wanted to

o regard particular individuals as their "master", "father", or "teacher", but Paul wanted them to understand that in doing so they were falling short of their full inheritance in Christ. He wanted them to see that all of these teachers, belonged to them as servant-ministers, and not the other way around.

IT'S ABOUT a SUBSTITUTE KING

At the heart of the Corinthians' idolatry was the age-old desire for a ruler, a king. The flesh would much rather fear man than fear God. The flesh would much rather submit to the control of law than submit to the freedom of the Spirit. This principle is seen throughout scripture.

Afraid they would die, the Israelites begged Moses to be God's messenger to them, rather than hear His Voice for themselves.

"Now all the people witnessed the thunderings, the lightning flashes, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they trembled and stood afar off. Then they said to Moses, "You speak with us, and we will hear; but let not God speak with us, lest we die." (Exodus 20:18-19)

God desired for the people to hear Him for themselves, but they refused. Effectively, the Israelites were elevating Moses as their mediator. The entire nation had been called as a kingdom of priests, but their preference was to be ruled by one man. (Exodus 19:1-9)

Many years later, when the prophet Samuel officiated as Israel's judge, Israel's carnal desire for a man-king surfaced again.

"Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah, and said to him, "Look, you are old, and your sons do not walk in your ways. Now make us a king to judge us like all the nations." But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, "Give us a king to judge us." So Samuel prayed to the Lord. And the Lord said to Samuel, "Heed the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me, that I should not reign over them... However, you shall solemnly forewarn the people, and show them the behaviour of the king who will reign over them." So Samuel told all the words of the Lord to the people who asked him for a king. And he said, "This will be the behaviour of the king who will reign over you: He will take your sons and appoint them for his own chariots... And he will take your male servants, your female servants, your finest young men, and your donkeys, and put them to his work. He will take a tenth of your sheep. And you will be his servants. And you will cry out in that day because of your king whom you have chosen for yourselves, and the Lord will not hear you in that day." Nevertheless the people refused to obey the voice of Samuel; and they said, "No, but we will have a king over us..." (1 Samuel 8:4-22)

The key to Israel's demand for a human king, rather than the direct reign of Yahweh over them, was "that we also may be like all the nations, and that our king may judge us and go out before us and fight our battles." They wanted a name and a face that could "go out before" them. They wanted someone visible they could show the other nations. They wanted a symbol, a token leader who could take responsibility for how they would live and conduct their lives. They wanted someone with a reputation they could identify with. They wanted to be like the world. They wanted human "covering."

You see, friends, there is a place for governmental leadership, there is a place for accountability within the Body, there is a place for submission to legitimate God-delegated authority. All these are valid and in order, but only insofar as they are not permitted to substitute for the direct rule of God in our lives. And only insofar as they are not sought out as a counterfeit for the sovereignty and rulership of the Holy Spirit within each believer.

IT'S OF a DIFFERENT SPIRIT

"You were the anointed cherub who covers; I established you; you were on the holy mountain of God; you walked back and forth in the midst of fiery stones." (Ezekiel 28:14)

Many Bible scholars agree that God's rebuke to the "king of Tyre" recorded in Ezekiel 28:1-19 is prophetically addressed to Satan. In it, we find that originally this fallen angel was called the "anointed cherub who covers". Some scholars believe

he was especially anointed to cover the Mercy Seat in the Holy of Holies. In the Presence of God, he walked back and forth in the midst of the fiery stones. The passage states that when iniquity was found in him he was cast out of God's holy mountain, and removed from the midst of the fiery stones.

This Hebrew word "to cover" means "to hedge, fence about, shut in, block, overshadow, screen, stop the approach, shut off, cover" (H. "cakak" Strong's 05526). It is a word that can be used either in relation to defence or oppression.

Beloved, Satan still desires to walk back and forth in the midst of God's living, fiery stones. He still desires to be the covering cherub on God's holy mountain, but the covering he offers is oppressive, designed purely to hinder believers and rob them of the freedom and full potential that is ours through Christ.

The doctrine of covering is an old lie with a new name. It is fundamental to the maintenance of a false hierarchical religious system controlling many Christians in this day. Without the power of this erroneous mindset, it is even doubtful that some sections of the "church" could survive.

"Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit - just as you were called to one hope when you were called - one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is OVER ALL and THROUGH ALL and IN ALL. (Ephesians 4:3-6) The scriptures plainly state that it is God alone who is OVER all. Only God can cover His people, and only the Holy Spirit can unite them. The most disturbing aspect about the covering teaching is that it subtly encourages believers to look to men and women rather than develop their own deep relationship with God through the Holy Spirit. It upholds a man-made church built on hierarchy rather than a spiritual temple built through the unity of the Spirit. It promotes a class system of rulership by title, human appointment and personality, and DEVALUES the PRIESTHOOD of every believer. It negates leadership by the Holy Spirit and discourages believers from hearing the direction of the Spirit for themselves. It is a DOCTRINE OF DEMONS being used to deceive and bind countless believers.

Now, about that freedom we were talking about at the beginning of this article! Don't, repeat DON'T, use your newfound liberty as a licence for rebellion against authority. If you have been trapped in this covering doctrine be wise in how you appropriate your freedom. There are many, many humble and faithful men and women overseeing and serving the Body of Christ with humility and devotion, and it may well be that whoever has been "covering" you is one of them. If you are blessed enough to be aligned with a servant-leader who demonstrates true Biblical authority, honour them, support them, and submit to them. But don't expect them to cover you - that's not theirs to give.

False doctrines are mindsets and beliefs that can only be cast down by the Spirit and the Word together. And ultimately, our walk in the Spirit is not the responsibility of leadership; it is our own responsibility. It is time for each one of us to choose - do we want the rulership of kings, or do we want the rulership of THE King?

Finally, let me leave you with these thoughts:

- 1) Who covered Philip when He went down to Samaria and started a revival? (The apostles heard about it and sent Peter and John down to check it out!) (Acts 8:4-8)
- 2) Who covered Philip when the angel of the Lord directed him to the Gaza desert? (Acts 8:26-40) (There's no record of the Ethiopian eunuch asking him for his "covering" credentials!)
- 3) Who covered Ananias when he was sent to pray for Saul? (He went to pray for a known enemy of the church and didn't even get permission!) (Acts 9:10-18)
- 4) Who covered Apollos when he taught boldly in the synagogue, even though he had not yet received the full gospel? (Acts 18:24-25)
- 5) And who covered Aquilla and Priscilla when they took Apollos under their wing to instruct him further? (Acts 18:26)
- 6) Who covered Agabus when he travelled down from Judea to deliver a prophetic word to Paul? (Acts 21:10)

The answer is the same in each instance: The Holy Spirit covered, protected, led, and enabled. He is the only covering

we need. The real question is this: is He the only covering we want?

Re: UNCOVERING the "COVERING DOCTRINE" - C MacGrath, on: 2011/3/23 7:02

Hopefully, the above article will be an eye-opener for those still locked in the vestiges of the 'Pyramid Movement' of the 70s - happily and legalistically having been embraced by far too many shepherds, and then, their sheep. (The other name for it was 'The Shepherding Movement')