

“Who is Your Covering?”

This is a question that is often asked to anyone gathering outside the limits of an institutional or organized body. What do people really mean when they ask this question? Does this question have biblical merit? How do believers assembling together organically, keep from falling into error? These are the questions that this paper will seek to answer.

Where does this idea of “covering” come from? It seems to be an almost universal understanding found with most believers in the church. This doctrine of “protective covering” maintains that Christians are protected from doctrinal error and moral failure when they submit themselves to the authority of another believer or Christian organization. It is my opinion that this “covering” doctrine creates *a false sense of security*, creating even more of a potential for error. Moral failure and doctrinal error continue to run rampant in our religious institutional structures. People trust and depend on the system to a fault. Many do not know the scriptures for themselves, but simply believe every word spoken by the man behind the pulpit. We give our responsibility to discern and know truth over to others in authority over us, who are there to “cover” us. The blind continue to lead the blind.

Please do not assume that I write these things out of a deep hurt or bad experience with organized church or leadership. Many of us have been hurt by leaders, myself included. Others in my care, as a leader, have felt hurt by me. This article is not a reaction, nor a product of idealism. I am simply trying to ask some honest questions. At this point, I do not see the “covering” teaching as something biblical and I would like to show you why I believe that.

First, let’s look at the word “covering” itself. Surprisingly, the word appears once in the entire NT, and it is used in connection with a woman’s head covering in 1Cor. 11:15. Paul encouraged the women to keep this cultural norm. He used this physical “head covering” as a picture to symbolize the woman’s submission to God’s authority in her marriage, having a healthy relationship with her husband. There is nothing here to indicate that this also applies to relationships outside of marriage, particularly with one believer to another. The husband is the head in his home. Who is the head of the church? That position is never given to anyone but Christ Himself. Is there sufficient argument in this passage alone to support the teaching of “protective covering” in the church?

When we come to the Old Testament, the word “covering” is used sparingly, and always in reference to a piece of natural clothing or an overlay of some sort. It is never used in a spiritual sense to represent authority and submission. Why do Christians instinctively use language that not even the Scriptures use? **“Who is your covering” is simply not a very biblical expression.** So, then what do people really mean when they ask this? If questioned, most Christians would

rephrase it by asking “To whom are you accountable?” I think every believer would agree that we all should be accountable to someone, and that this is a primary litmus test in measuring the authenticity of a church or ministry. However, we still have to ask ourselves, is this idea also biblical? This leads us to another shocking discovery: the Bible **never** demands “accountability” to human beings. It consigns **it exclusively to God alone** (Matt. 12:36; 18:23; Luke 16:2; Rom. 3:19; 14:12; 1 Cor. 4:5; Heb. 4:13; 13:17; 1 Pet. 4:5) How would one react if you were to answer this question biblically: *“I am accountable to the same person you are-God!”*

This is the problem I have with the prevalent understanding of “accountability”. One person has the task of watching how the other behaves in a certain area of life. Their responsibility is to hold that person accountable, ask the awkward questions, and talk to them when they mess up. This whole thing is very flawed. This is an attempt at changing behavior from the outside. The idea of accountability to another person is trying to deal with temptation and sin externally. It can’t change the heart.

I may, for example, ask you to hold me accountable in my tendency to use profanity. My intentions are good, but the method is faulty. Will I stop swearing because you are going to ask me about it? How does this deal with the root of the problem? Is there bitterness in my heart? Do I have un-forgiveness? All we are doing is exerting our combined efforts of will-power to remove the bad fruit in me, but as long as the root is there, the fruit will grow back. Inevitably, I will be tempted to make sure that you never see me stumble, but in my heart nothing has changed. This incites hypocrisy and guilt. This is all based on a fear of man and not a fear of God. We are saying that we are going to stop this behavior because a man is watching. **Well, God is watching.** Why would we listen to men and not God? There has to be an inward change and a receiving of the Spirit of the fear of the Lord. Real transformation comes from within. The axe must be laid to the root of this tree.

Also, how can that person that we are accountable to really be qualified to hold us accountable? It seems this is a responsibility that only belongs to God, who alone knows the secrets of our hearts. *We are attributing Divine privilege to men. This is a form of idolatry.* People cannot handle that kind of power. It does corrupt them. Having said all this, the Scripture does instruct us on how to live with one another in such a way that we change and overcome evil together. We will explore this later.

What are we really talking about here? I have a suspicion that this question of “covering” goes deeper than “accountability”. What I believe people are really asking (probably not consciously) is **“who controls you?”** The religious system is based on control. If we take an honest look at the “covering” teaching, we will have to admit that it is based on a *one-up/one-down, hierarchical chain-of-command structure.* And it is thought that through such a top-down

control that Christians are believed to be protected from error. These “higher” authorities can say “hey, you can’t do that” or “don’t proceed without answering to us”.

It’s like this: Everyone must answer to someone higher in the pyramid. The lay people are “covered” by the pastor, the pastor is “covered” by a denominational headquarter, mother church or some prominent Christian leader (who appears to be higher on the pyramid). The idea that any one believer can trace their accountability to a higher ecclesiastical authority is grounds to being protected by that authority.

Now if you follow the logic through to its end, then who covers the mother church, denominational headquarter, or Christian worker? At this point, some would say it is “God” who covers them. My question is, “If God can cover these “higher authorities” than can’t God directly cover the “laypeople”. Even more than being faulty logic, this God-Denomination-Clergy-Laity model violates the teaching and Spirit of the New Testament. Behind the curtain of sayings like “providing accountability” and “having a covering”, lurks a system lacking Biblical support and driven by the spirit of control.

The Greatest is a Servant

Control and pride are the earmarks of any order rooted in this world. Jesus had strong words to say about this system, whether political or religious. He introduced us to a new order that is centered in the poor, the lame, the sick and the weak. Jesus turned the pyramid upside-down. He taught us that the greatest in His kingdom is the servant.

Look at what Jesus had to say about the Gentile political system of government:

“ You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you: but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave – Just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life for a ransom for many.” Matthew 20:25-28

Jesus spoke these words as a result of James and John’s mother requesting positions of greatness for her sons. In the parallel passage in Luke, the context there is the disciples having an argument about who will be the greatest. There is no room for this kind of talk in the kingdom of God. Arrogance and hunger for power is the spirit of Lucifer himself, and not the fruit of the Holy Spirit. Jesus told the Pharisees that their father was the devil. And yet every evil system has propensity to elevate the elite and control the majority. Jesus said this should have no place in the fellowship of believers.

Jesus also identified the same spirit working in the religious institutions of His day:

“ But you, do not be called Rabbi, for one is your teacher, the Christ, and you are all brethren. Do not call anyone on earth father; for one is your Father, He who is in heaven. And do not be called teachers, for one is your teacher, the Christ. But he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted”. Matt. 23:8-12

The religious Scribes and Pharisees relished in the praise and honor given by men. They held to their **titles** and **positions** with spiritual pride and self righteousness. They were the specialist, who focused on public presence, status and prestige. Selfishness makes its presence known. It doesn't take much to be religious, self righteous, prideful, and power hungry. We are to no longer to do the works of the flesh.

Jesus showed us by example to wash each other's feet. He commanded us to do this. Jesus taught us that the servant should not expect reward or a return of the favor when he is asked by the Master to do something. He taught us only to say “we are unprofitable servants, we have done what is our duty to do.” (Luke 17:5-10) What do you think would happen if we all, as believers, just served each other without expectation of anything in return? That sounds like the kind of church the New Testament talks about. What would it be like if leaders were the ones that set the example? I don't think it would look like anything we see now.

You are all Brethren

The word *adelphoi*, translated “*brethren*,” appears 346 times in the NT and 134 times in Paul's writings alone. By contrast, “*elders*” appear in Paul's letters five times, “*overseers*” four times, and “*pastors*” (note in the plural) only once. Why does the *NT* give so little attention to the role of *leaders* and so much attention to the general community? It seems to me that the bulk of responsibility for pastoral care, teaching, and ministry rests on the shoulders of **all** the brethren. The Scriptures paint a beautiful picture of people living with such love and devotion to one another, the need for any forced systems of accountability becomes obsolete. Loving relationship seems to be the organic substitute for institutional accountability structures. In the context of love, we are told to confess our faults to another and bear with another. There is no judgment in this place. There is understanding, grace, and believing the best about each other. It's love. It's all about love.

What about Leadership

I believe that we need leaders, but not just any kind. Those passages that speak of *elders*, *overseers* and *pastors* do tell us some very crucial and defining characteristics of *godly leadership*. Elders are the more mature ones in our company that have gained the trust of the rest. They model “kingdom” living and walk in the fruit of Jesus. They care about the others like

a mother or a father would care for a child. The Holy Spirit Himself has made them to watch over the rest and they live life among the brethren, **not** over them. Because of this great responsibility of watching, protecting, and caring for people in loving relationships, they will give account before God. We are to respond to these ones by recognizing and esteeming them, receiving and respecting them, and being open to their admonishment. We are not to resist them or bring sharp accusations against them, without solid evidence. It is wise for us to not make their responsibility any heavier than it already is. (Acts 20:28; Titus 1:5-7; 1 Pet. 5:1-4; 1 Cor. 16:13-18; 1Thess. 5:12, 13; Heb. 13:7, 17; Phil. 2:25-30; 1Tim. 5:1; 5:19)

So how do we keep from error?

Like I said before, I wonder if we feel a false sense of security being under the "authority" of an organized body. Certainly, this does not make us exempt from falling into error. I am concerned that people feel safe due to their association with the organization. Often there is this idea that assembling outside the walls of organized religion exposes us to the danger of becoming a cult. Cults tend to idolize men and alienate themselves, thinking that they are the only ones with the truth. I see these same characteristics in mainline evangelical denominations and churches.

Being under the authority of the organized church does not keep you safe from error. In fact, I believe it is even more dangerous at times. Historically, it was always the organized church that persecuted genuine moves of God in any given generation. Jesus was considered dangerous and a heretic. What about cults such as the Mormons or the Jehovah's Witnesses. They are definitely under authority and accountability.

Jesus said that the *religious leaders* of His day were in error for two reasons: (1) they did not know the Scriptures, (2) nor the power of God. Matthew 22:29

The Holy Scriptures:

The Scriptures are able to make us wise for salvation through faith in Christ. The Scripture is useful for doctrine, reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:15-17).

Each believer must study the scriptures for themselves. We must learn not to just take someone else's word on it. Often, verses can be taken out of context and the Bible can be made to say whatever the preacher wants it to say. **We must take responsibility** in learning the truth for ourselves. I truly believe that anyone with an authentic relationship with Jesus, can know what the Scriptures are saying and how to apply them. Jesus will open up our understanding that we might comprehend the Scriptures (Luke 24:24).

A proper foundation in the heart of a new believer is paramount. Jesus is the only true foundation to be laid (1Cor. 3:10). That foundation is built with the teaching of the apostles (Eph. 2:20, Acts 2:42). The teachings of the apostles, expressed in the NT, confirms the OT

prophecies as being fulfilled in Jesus, and is centered in the person of Jesus and His teaching pertaining to the kingdom of God. I believe that when the apostolic gospel is sown into the heart of a person, it is a powerful seed, containing all that person needs to grow and become what he or she was created by God to be. There is power in that seed. That seed is the word of the Kingdom. It is the very person of Jesus.

We also should not ignore the fact that there are equipping ministries and gifts among us. These are men and women who can teach and instruct in the word of God, who are called of God. Modern day apostles, teachers and elders have this task of guarding and upholding the truth in times of great deception. They are gifts to Christ's body. They are here to help the rest and prepare **every believer** to be a student and teacher of the word themselves.

The Holy Spirit, the power of God: Do we under-estimate the ability of the Holy Spirit to be able to keep us on track? Look at the church in Thessalonica. Paul probably only spent three months there before being chased out of town. That means that the oldest believer was only three months old. Paul was sure that his labor there was in vain, until he sent Timothy there to investigate what was left of the church. Surprisingly, Timothy found the church strong in faith and love and thriving (1Thess. chapters 1 + 2). Remember, Jesus promised that the Father would send the Holy Spirit and that He would lead us into all truth. (John 14:16-18, 25, 26; 15:26; 16:5-15) We were not left as orphans. We all have access to the Spirit of Truth and can know God personally. I always try to convey to believers I know that they can know God for themselves. They have an open connection to him directly. Jesus' sheep know His voice. We have received the Spirit of God, who makes us know "the things that have been freely given to us by God" (1Cor. 2:12). He is capable of this and is much better at it than we could ever be.

Why do we feel that we are safer in the hands of men than in the hands of God? There must be a fundamental belief that the *clergy* has an ability to know the truth more than the average person does. This is reminiscent of the Dark Ages, when it was believed that only the priests could read and really understand the mysterious message of the Bible.

In the first chapter of the book of Ephesians, Paul prays for the believers to be "filled with the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him." He goes on in verses 18 to 23 to say: *"...the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power which He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come. And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all."*

The Spirit of God wants to open our understanding to the fact that there is great power working on our behalf. It is equal to the power that raised Jesus from the dead and lifted Him to the highest authority there is. From that place of authority, Jesus directs the activity of His body as head. You and I are directly connected to that Head, which is Christ. We fall into error when we don't know the power of God. He is committed to taking us through to finish the course. God has something invested in us. You can be sure that God is able to keep you in truth. Paul wrote,

"I am persuaded that He is able to keep what I have committed to Him until that Day" (2Tim. 1:12).

"being confident of this very thing, that He who had begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ" Phil. 1:6

Summary and Final Thought

Let me bring all this together in one simple picture. **Relationship** is the pathway of truth and light. Jesus embodied the truth and sends us out with the same mandate. These relationships start with a few believing friends that are joined together in love and community. Among them are a few *mature* believers (*elders*), who help to guide the rest. They usually just meet around the table. They are a church. The sphere of relationship increases. They are connected to other such groups through a common hub of ministry and care. That hub is the apostle who helped to birth that group and the others like it. However, the circle of friendship is extended even wider to relationships with other hubs of apostles and churches. These connections are not formal or legal, but relational and organic in nature.

Someone will ask me the question. "Who is your covering?" I'll then proceed to ask them what they mean by that. When we get down to what they are really saying. This is how I answer: *"I am accountable to God, of course. I have the Scriptures to keep me on track and I also have a strong faith in the power of the Holy Spirit to lead me into all truth. I fellowship regularly with a group of believers that meets in my home. This group is connected to other churches here in this city and abroad, through relationship. It's wonderful to be part of the body of Jesus!"*

So there you have it. I guess this is fairly long answer to a "simple" question. I suppose this paper makes a lot of sense to some of you and yet others, it only raises more questions. I think asking questions is a good thing, especially the question "why". Why do we believe what we believe and why do we do what we do? Children ask "why" instinctively. Most of us adults have stopped asking questions. We accept what we've been told or what everyone else says is true. I hope I was able to cast reasonable doubt on the teaching of "protective covering", and reaffirm the powerful reality of our connection to the Head, Jesus. If this widely accepted teaching is found wanting in Biblical support, one has to wonder how many others like it are there. What else do we unquestioningly accept in the church that simply is not the truth? It sure makes you think. The revolution has begun!

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