

CHAPTER 5

SPIRITUAL COVERING: COME OUT, COME OUT, WHEREVER YOU ARE!



Christians often live far below their potential. What we express with our mouths often does not match what we express with our lives: the “profession-expression gap.” While our behavior does not save us, it does have kingdom impact. Few things hinder Christ’s interests in the lives of unbelievers more effectively than the poor testimony of His own. Our evangelistic efforts can be near impossible because of the debris of bad testimony left by the Christian who may have gone before us. This doesn’t excuse the unbeliever, but it sure doesn’t make our task easier! It is not a matter of living some sort of idealistic, perfect, or fault-free existence in order to qualify as a bona fide Christian witness. Romans 8:19 says the creation awaits the manifestation of “sons.” That is relational. What the world longs to see is *genuineness in relationships*: with God, each other, and the world.

A noble goal pursued by ignoble means becomes an ignoble goal. Perplexed leaders throughout history have attempted to address this profession-expression gap by preaching and teaching various forms of “discipleship” and “accountability.” However, the press for discipleship is frequently counterproductive and often disastrous. In the US, approximately 80% of young people raised in the Church will leave by the

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age of twenty-one and never come back. I would suggest that indicates something is wrong in our goals, mindset, means, and methods. Bad fruit comes from a bad root.

A Bad Idea That Just Won't Go Away

One of the deficient methods used historically¹ to attempt to close this gap, which is experiencing modified and expanded resurgence in the emergent apostolic movement, is the doctrine of “spiritual covering.” Those of us over forty are old enough to remember the discipleship movement of the seventies. It was the poster child of good intentions gone bad. To their great and eternal credit, many of the primary leaders of the movement later repented for their error and the excesses of the movement.

There are many degrees and variations on this teaching. At its most benign level, having a spiritual covering is used in a non-technical sense of relating to someone who looks out for or cares for me. Certainly, the lack of genuine care for one another, and especially for pastors and leaders, is epidemic in the church. Most people are in it for themselves. Finding an authentic Christian who genuinely cares for your welfare is a wonderful thing. Caring for one another and looking out for one another is as elemental to Christianity as chicken to the colonel. The problem is twofold: 1) *covering* is not the term the Bible uses for mutual care (the misuse of terminology can get us in trouble), and 2) though benign in intent, it easily becomes malignant in expression.

The doctrine espouses that everyone needs a spiritual covering—someone to whom they are accountable. Allegedly, the divine order is: husbands cover wives, pastors cover their church, apostles cover pastors (and other ministries submitted to them), and other apostles cover apostles. I have found that the last of this list can be pretty weak. Dr. C. Peter Wagner honestly points out that the matter of apostle-to-apostle accountability “is not totally resolved.”² That is a kind way of putting it.

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Authority can be an intoxicating brew. It is far easier to exercise it than yield to it or yield it to another. This is another reason why it is a mistake to define apostles and the apostolic movement primarily in terms of authority, rather than from a center of Calvary-consciousness. Great authority or “visionary leadership” do not distinguish apostles but rather their patience, power, love, and suffering.³ We will talk more about this in the next chapter.

Spiritual covering doctrine slides from, at best, a poor choice of words⁴ for benign care to damnable doctrine when it is: a) defined positionally in terms of position and office, and b) when the one providing the alleged covering becomes a literal broker for divine blessing to flow or spiritual protection to be in place for an individual or church. Some believe that a spiritual covering is a power dimension, a literal spiritual force-field keeping “bad things” from happening to believers and releasing “good things” to the believer⁵ It is alleged that individual believers and the church corporately must be under the protective shield of an individual apostle’s covering.⁶

What does this doctrine say about: a) Satan’s ability to “get at the saints,” and b) the Lord’s ability to take care of His own? It is not well thought out. It needs to be rejected for the superstitious spiritual paranoia that it is. The power of the life of Christ is in participation with Him in His death and resurrection,⁷ not in the spiritual covering of an apostle. Whether or not we have relationship with others who can speak to and care for us is not the issue. It is the implication of the idea that a man, any man, can take the place of Christ: “Who is your spiritual covering?” as defined by rank and positioning. When maintenance of “governmental alignment” or “staying under covering” are contingent for the believer to receive divine blessing or to avoid divine judgment,⁸ we have embraced an anti-Christ spirit, regardless of how well intended our motives may be.

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It Takes a Village . . .?

Apostolic covering does not answer the primordial question, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” The believing community does. Responsibility for one another rests on the corporate community, not a single pastor or apostle. Care is not a leadership duty, nor an apostolic one: it is a believer’s task. The fact that care is so rare and falls so frequently on the shoulders of leaders is a sign of our dysfunction, not divine alignment with principle. The problem is leaders illicitly *enjoy* the feeling of having others dependent on them. Lazy and passive believers are only too willing to comply.

In the New Covenant, believers are to:

- discipline one another (1 Corinthians 5:3–5, 6:1–6),
- warn the unruly (1 Thessalonians 5:14),
- admonish one another (Romans 15:14),
- teach one another (Colossians 3:16),
- care for one another (1 Corinthians 12:25),
- exhort one another (Hebrews 3:13, 10:25),
- confess sin to and pray for one another (James 5:16),
- encourage one another (1 Thessalonians 5:11),
- stir up to love and good works (Hebrews 10:24),
- serve one another (Galatians 5:13 and more).

Who says it is the pastor or apostle who must provide all care and counseling functions? To think so is to view ministry from position rather than function, as we talked about in chapter 3 (higher authority). If what you need is a word of knowledge, why go to a pastor who does not operate in that gift, just because he is the pastor? The notion that a given individual (pastor, apostle, whomever) is fully equipped with all resource, for every situation and need, simply because of their positional delegated office, is simply insanity. If you need discernment or prophetic insight, don’t go to a pastor whose gifts are compassion and exhortation! Go to where the supply is, regardless of the vessel! If