

Christian: Who Is Your Covering?

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Isaiah 30:1-Woe to the rebellious children, saith the LORD, that take counsel, but not of me; and that cover with a covering, but not of my spirit, that they may add sin to sin:

There are many Christians who have asked, "Who is my covering?" The word covering has not generally been found in historic Christian literature, but it has been brought to people's attention through the teachings of the [shepherding movement](#) that was popular in the 1970's and 1980's.

Some of the shepherding movement's teachings are present today in various Christian groups, thus it is important to examine these doctrines. The shepherding movement was an attempt to solve some of the church's shortcomings, the most important being that many Christians were not properly "discipled," or taught how to grow in the faith.

In the traditional church many new believers had been left on their own to study the Bible, learn how to pray, and learn how to have a lifestyle that is pleasing to the Lord. The shepherding movement believed many new converts became "casualties," and soon dropped out of the church.

The shepherding movement attempted to correct the situation by saying that each Christian should have a shepherd over them to guide their everyday lives. This shepherd became the person's spiritual leader, counseling him and even making

decisions for him. It was taught that the shepherd was "God's delegated authority" and therefore his advice was always to be followed. The shepherd was like "God's ambassador" who communicated God's messages to us. To disobey God's messages would be to disobey God, and therefore we were to trust in the shepherd's judgment rather than our own.

Because of the tremendous amount of authority given to a shepherd, Christians were taught to seek God to find the shepherd the Lord wanted for them. It was stated that when we find the right shepherd, he becomes our covering, or protection.

Because of our "divine relationship" with this shepherd, we are supposed to be protected from him making wrong decisions that affect us. We are also supposed to be protected from Satan, since by obeying our shepherd the devil cannot come in and cause us to make foolish decisions.

Before we accept a teaching which has such total control over our life and our spiritual well-being, it is only reasonable to find out what the scriptures say. Is shepherding really a great spiritual truth that most of the church has missed over the years? What does scripture have to say about covering?

Definitions of Covering

First of all, we should examine the meaning of the word covering. The shepherding/discipleship movement is presumably trying to use the word in a biblical sense, since all

major shepherding teachers use the Bible as their basis of authority.

Covering is an Old Testament concept. To discover its meaning we must study the various Hebrew words translated as "covering" in their proper contexts.

The first Hebrew word is sakak which means the following:

Sakak means "to cover or hedge in" (Young, p. 209).

Figuratively, the word means "to protect," having the meaning of "to cover, defend, hedge in, join together, set, or shut up" (James Strong, The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible, p. 82).

In other words, men can protect themselves by joining together, shutting themselves up or fortifying their positions, or hedging themselves in so that the enemy cannot see or reach them.

The Bible says the Lord is our covering in the sakak sense (and not a man). Psalm 91:3 says the Lord does the following things:

He rescues you from the snares of fowlers hoping to destroy you; he covers you with his feathers, and you find shelter underneath his wings. (Jerusalem Bible).

The second Hebrew word is kasah which means the following:

The primary meaning of kasah is "to cover for clothing or secrecy" (Strong, p. 56). It also means "to cover over, conceal" (Brown, Driver, and Briggs, A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament, p. 491).

Proverbs 10:12 says that "love covers all offences" (Jerusalem Bible). A leading biblical commentator says that by love we will "overlook the offence that is given us, and cover it, and by this means strife is prevented" (Matthew Henry, Commentary on The Whole Bible, p. 749). The sin thus is not removed, but merely concealed.

The third Hebrew word that we find is kaphar. The King James Bible translates this word as "to make atonement," and from the same root comes Yom Kippur, or "Day of Atonement." This root also means: "cover over, pacify, make propitiation" (Brown, Driver, and Briggs, p. 497).

As opposed to **kasah**, which is "to cover something over," **kaphar** means to completely "wipe it out, annul it, and make it non-existent." (John Walvoord, Daniel: The Key to Prophetic Revelation, pp.221, 222).

The word **kaphar** is used in context with the blood offering of the Old Testament. Aaron, the first high priest of Israel, was commanded to slaughter the goat of the sin offering for the people, bring its blood inside the veil, and sprinkle it on the mercy seat and in front of the mercy seat. This was to make atonement for the holy place, because of the sins of Israel (Lev. 16:15, 16).

The Implications of Covering

As Christians we must ask ourselves: To what sense of the word covering are people referring when they say "I am the

covering." If you read the material published by the shepherding/discipleship movement, it is apparent that covering is used in the sense of "protection" (**sakak**). According to the teaching, having a shepherd is like having a **"divine insurance policy."**

If you suffer loss by making a mistake, you are "covered" because you are in submission to your shepherd. Although the shepherding movement does not guarantee that your shepherd will never steer you wrong, it does say that God will repay you and make things right because you are **"in submission."**

It is obvious, however, that the claims of shepherding are not only for **sakak covering**, but also for **kaphar covering**. In New Wine magazine the following statement is made:

Also, as Christians, we do not obey those in authority because they are right; we obey them because they are in authority, and all authority ultimately stems from God Himself.

Derek Prince, "Discipleship, Shepherding & Authority,
New Wine, Feb. 1976, p. 13

If this is true, the implication is that we could do something that is normally considered sin, i.e. something that is out of God's will. We may not know it is sin, but we do not have to worry about it because we are "covered" by our shepherd. In other words, for us this action would not be sin, because we are being judged for our submission rather than for our action.

In the Old Testament, sin was blotted out through covering. Shepherding teaches the same concept through its system of submission:

Our Action

We obey our shepherd, but our action is not according to the Bible and is against God's will (it is sin)

"Covering"

We are "covered" through our submission to a shepherd

Result

Because of our "submission" the action of sin becomes an act of righteousness and obedience

If our sin could be transformed in this way, it could only be through kaphar covering. Only through kaphar, or atonement, could sin thus be removed, annulled, wiped out, and made non-existent. In other words, the shepherding/discipleship movement teaches that atonement or propitiation comes through the shepherd and the authority structure to which we are submitted.

Why is it necessary to be so harsh against shepherding? It is to be expected that a shepherd, living the way of the Lord, teaching a disciple the way of the Lord, would not lead his disciples astray, causing them to commit sin. The answer is because of shepherding's own teaching, saying that someone who is not in submission is in sin (NOT that disciples are judged

for their actions based on whether the actions are in accord with the word of God).

Continued rejection of God's delegated authority results in finally rejecting God and going our own way--a rebel! (Bob Mumford, *The Problem of Doing Your Own Thing*, p. 71).

Christians, whether they are "**submitted**" to someone or not, need to take personal responsibility for their actions. If they are being disciplined by someone they should use this as a tool to help them grow spiritually, and not to be led into an unhealthy and unbiblical "authority" structure.

Christ is Our True Covering

Christians should recognize Jesus Christ as the true covering as it is described in the Bible. God did not set up shepherds or anyone else to be a covering instead of Christ, and the misunderstanding of this truth is one of the gravest errors of the shepherding movement.

We have a role in *kasah* covering. God wants us to cover the sins of others through love. We acknowledge that a person has sinned, but we forgive that person just as God has forgiven us.

For the concept of **sakak covering**, shepherding starts to get into dangerous ground. Shepherding teaches that our submission to a shepherd will protect us from evil. The Bible says: "**The Lord is my strength and my shield; My heart trusts in Him, and I am helped...**" (Psalm 28:7).

In contrast to this, the Word says: "**Do not trust in princes, In mortal man, in whom there is no salvation**" (Psalm 146:3).

The shepherding movement puts fear in people by saying:

Efforts to by-pass or side-step a shepherd and "go it alone" will end in frustration, deception, and spiritual ruin.

Editorial, New Wine, May 1974, p. 3

However, in I Corinthians 2, Paul instructs the church about how Christ speaks to us. The Lord does this through His Spirit (v. 12) "**that we might know the things freely given to us by God.**" If we are spiritual, then, we can appraise all things (v. 15). To top it all off, Paul says that "**we have the mind of Christ**" (v. 16). All Christians have the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:9), and thus have the capacity to know the mind of Christ.

Moreover, we know that Christ speaks to us (Rev. 3:20), and that He has promised to be with us to the end of the age (Matt. 28:20). John 16:13 says the Holy Spirit will "**guide you into all the truth,**" and if we are led by the Spirit of God, we are sons of God (Rom. 8:14). Our relationship with Christ, then, is a personal one, not just an indirect one that comes through submission to the shepherds.

It is legitimate for Christian churches to have elders, or shepherds. They are to teach the word of God. Since Christians have the Holy Spirit, we can judge all things, even what the church leaders are saying. We should be humble and open to what God is saying through our leaders.

These shepherds can provide protection, or an extra safety net to ensure that when we study the Bible we are interpreting it correctly. It is totally wrong, however, to say that our protection comes through our submission.

The most egregious error, however, is in relation to **kaphar covering**. This occurs because shepherding teaches blind obedience. The shepherd does not have to be right, we just have to obey.

The shepherding movement has applied to men what rightfully belongs to God. Instead of saying the Lord is our covering, it claims that shepherds are our covering. While the Bible says we can trust in God for our strength and guidance, the shepherding movement says we need a man also. Shepherding fills people with fear and doubt about whether God can really take care of them.

By saying we do not obey those in authority because they are right, but because they are in authority, shepherding comes dangerously close to claiming **kaphar covering**. As we have seen from the Hebrew lexicon, **the words covering, atonement, and propitiation** have the same meaning.

Romans 3:25 says Jesus Christ was displayed publicly "as a propitiation in His blood through faith." If we substitute the synonymous terms we see that:

Our propitiation comes in the blood of Jesus through faith.
Our atonement comes in the blood of Jesus through faith.

Our covering comes in the blood of Jesus through faith.

A Better Answer

Over the years the shepherding movement in its original form has largely died out, and some of its original leaders have had to modify some of their teaching and denounce some of the "extremes" that occurred in the movement.

It is doubtful that any of these teachers ever intended to replace Christ as a Christian's propitiation. Nevertheless, this could be the result of shepherding if it is followed to its logical conclusion.

The best course is not to "play with fire" in the first place, and not get into false teaching even if it sounds "spiritual." The same types of teachings about shepherding, discipleship, and spiritual authority exist today, and Christians should not fall under them.

Instead, we should trust in the Lord as our covering.

Proverbs 3:5 and 6 says:

Trust in the Lord with all your heart, And do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, And He will make your paths straight.

When people have their total trust in the Lord, we can then give them the help and advice they need to learn how to grow as a Christian. Then we will see strong Christians develop, rather than weak and fearful ones.