

# SPIRITUAL UNCOVERING

30<sup>th</sup> October 2013 by Norman Walford

One of the highlights—if I can call it that—of the legal calendar this year in Singapore has been the drawn-out trial of the senior pastor of one to the largest churches on the island on charges of criminal breach of trust and falsification of accounts.



The amounts of money involved are mind-boggling—in US dollar terms it's about \$19,000,000. That's \$9,500,000 initially taken from the building fund to finance his wife's singing career, and then another \$9,500,000 to pay off the first \$9,500,000 to try and conceal it in the accounts. That's called the snowball effect, by the way.

I suppose I feel slightly vindicated, since in the final chapter of my book *How To Survive in the Pharisee Church* I had use this particular church as an example of high pressure fund-raising tactics that I had witnessed on one of my occasional visits to the Sunday morning services there.

But that's not what I want to talk about. The legal process will take its course and eventually a verdict will emerge. There's no point in prejudging the outcome. I want to talk about something else that I first encountered on one of my visits to that same church, which is the concept of SPIRITUAL COVERING.

I'd never heard of spiritual covering until that visit—perhaps that's my sheltered life!—so I had to try and work out what it meant from the context. The context was a strategy of the pastor to discourage people from leaving his church and moving to other churches. And the meaning was, as long as you stay in MY church, you have spiritual covering; whereas if you move to another church you lose that spiritual covering. As long as you stay in my church, I as pastor 'carry the can' for you in the eyes of God. God will recognize your sincerity and faithfulness, and so you will not be held accountable for any spiritual error you might get into as a result of my teaching. The responsibility will be mine, whereas you are 'covered'.

If you stay, you are covered. If you leave, you are vulnerable to God's judgment, Satan's attacks, whatever. So better stay. That's Spiritual Covering, a doctrine gaining some support in certain types of churches.

I can think of a lot of objections to spiritual covering, but I'll confine to a few:

1. Firstly, I've got spiritual covering already. I'm covered by the blood of Christ. I try to get my beliefs and my practices right of course, but I know that even if I don't, in the final analysis I'm accepted and I'm forgiven. I've been adopted into God's family and that's enough. Do I need any additional covering from the church or the pastor? No I don't, it's sufficient.
2. In fact there's a rather negative, defensive posture to this concept of spiritual covering that I find disturbing. The idea that if the pastor can somehow make me 'safe' I no longer need to fear the anger of God if I accidentally step out of line. I was going to say it's a bit 'Old Testament' except that would be to insult the Old Testament which doesn't really seriously put forward this kind of

system. I shouldn't be asking, How can I be safe?—I'm safe already. Rather, How can I be most effective?

3. In fact it's difficult to think of anything in the bible giving a precedent for this concept of spiritual covering by another human being—as opposed to the spiritual covering that comes from the atoning sacrifice of Jesus. It's the opposite. WE are responsible for the path we follow. And if we follow a false teaching or a false pastor we are still responsible for the path we take. The Old Testament prophets are full of it, God's anger—not with us the sheep, but with the pastors, the false prophets who lead well-meaning and sincere people onto the path of destruction thinking it to be the path to life.
4. The New Testament may be a bit more ambivalent when it comes to 'stepping outside'. I don't see that as a major doctrinal issue, rather as a practical issue in a tiny first century Christian movement with effectively only one church to choose from. Stepping out of the church meant a return to paganism, leaving God behind. Today, with a multiplicity of churches available to choose from, the situation is different. There's no parallel.
5. Then there's the ultimate inconsistency in the doctrine. Spiritual covering is used by pastors to protect their own congregation from attrition at the hands of neighbouring churches. It says that if you are a part of this church, then God wants you to stay a part of this church, permanently. BUT all pastors have a past. Almost without exception they've come from another church somewhere along the line. And if I'm not supposed to leave their church, then how come they were justified in leaving wherever it was that they came from themselves?
6. This is certainly true of the case in point. In many ways (leaving the money side out of it) he's done a great job. He's probably accomplished far more by the move than he ever would have by staying. No argument about that. But—if it's OK for him to leave that church, surely it's OK for ME to leave HIS church! If I feel called to leave his church and start something new, why can't he give his blessing and say, 'Fantastic! God go with you!'. Except that . . . his church is the RIGHT church and all the others are the WRONG church. Enough of that self-deluding nonsense!

Spiritual covering—a 'new' doctrine from the more authoritarian segment of the Christian church? A tool used by church leaders in authoritarian, one-man-show churches to cement their own positions and shore up their authority. But not of course something that would ever happen in a 'respectable' church—certainly not the rather staid Anglican church that I attend. Or is it?

When I think about it, others may not give it a formal name or elevate it quite to a doctrine. But the underlying mentality can still be there. Witness the highly negative reaction of my own vicar when he found out I'd been attending meetings in other churches. He COULD have said, "That's great Norman! Get out there and get some new ideas! I'm not perfect, go and listen to others, if you learn anything bring it back and let's hear it!" COULD have said, but didn't. What he actually said, I leave to your imagination.

Where does all this defensiveness come from? It comes from pride, and it comes from insecurity. Pride that can't bear to contemplate that any other church somewhere might actually be ahead of mine in hearing from God (no shame in admitting that, surely?). And insecurity which, granted, can be worse if you're a salaried church employee dependent on the success for the church for your daily bread. But aren't we supposed to be moving beyond that? Isn't that the whole point?

So why not have two churches? Perhaps we should ALL have two churches. Perhaps I'll come to that one next . . .