

LOCAL CHURCH COOPERATION

Lesson 3

I. INTRODUCTION.

A. Local Church Cooperation Is An Old Issue.

Alexander Campbell wrote articles about congregational cooperation in the *Millennial Harbinger* in 1835. Tolbert Fanning wrote articles about the same subject in the *Gospel Advocate* in 1855.

B. What Is and Is Not the Issue?

1. The issue is not: "May local churches cooperate?" Many local churches in the NT cooperated to get a particular work done. A local church can and must cooperate (if it has the ability) with other local churches.
2. The issue is: "How may local churches cooperate?" Is there a specific pattern for local church cooperation in the NT? Some brethren say "yes", others say "no". If there is no NT pattern for cooperation, then any type of cooperation would be acceptable.

C. "Cooperation".

1. "Cooperation" simply means to "operate (act or work) together" to achieve a common goal or purpose.
2. There are two kinds (types) of cooperation: joint cooperation (pooled resources and centralized control; that is, collective action) and concurrent cooperation (working together simultaneously, but independently of each other). Concurrent cooperation is found in the NT, but joint cooperation is not.
3. Failing to see the difference between these two kinds of cooperation has led some to say that concurrent cooperation is not "cooperation" at all, but merely "independent operation". Those brethren who advocate for concurrent cooperation have been labeled "anti-cooperation" by those brethren who advocate for joint cooperation.
4. Proper local church cooperation requires three things: 1) brotherly love; 2) operation (action, work); and 3) a NT pattern. Sometimes the first and second are emphasized to the neglect of the third.

II. COOPERATION — THE NT PATTERN.

A. Local Church Cooperation in Benevolence.

1. Local churches contributed directly to the local churches in need (Ac. 11:27-30; Rom. 15:26; 1 Cor. 16:1-4; 2 Cor. 8-9).
2. Note the following facts:
 - a) Both the funds and the messengers to carry the funds, were chosen by the local churches. These "messengers" were individuals (Paul and others), not local

churches and they served only in the capacity of delivering the contribution from the contributing church to the intended recipient (Acts 11:30; 1 Cor. 16:3; 2 Cor. 8:16ff; see also Acts 21:17-18; 24:17-18).

- b) Local churches with "ability" and "abundance" sent to local churches in "want" so there would be "equality" among all (2 Cor. 8:11-15). The local churches in "want" did not create their need and then ask other churches to help, nor did the churches in "want" send to the churches with "abundance".
- c) There was no church (a "sponsoring church") in between the contributing church(es) and the needy church(es).

B. Local Church Cooperation in Evangelism.

- 1. Local churches contributed financial support directly to the evangelist (Phil. 4:14-19; see also Ac.17:1-9; 18:5; 2 Cor.11:8-9).
- 2. Note the following facts:
 - a) No local church(es) sent funds to another local church to do evangelism. Funds were sent directly to an evangelist via a messenger (for example, Epaphroditus, Silas, Timothy, etc.).
 - b) There was no church (a "sponsoring church") in between the contributing church(es) and the evangelist.

C. Local Church Cooperation in Edification.

- 1. There is no NT example of a local church sending money to another local church for edification.
- 2. However, there are examples in the NT of a local church sending men to another local church to edify the brethren there (Acts 8:14; 11:22; 15:22 – 16:5).

D. Conclusion.

The NT pattern of local churches cooperating by sending funds directly to the recipient excludes local churches cooperating by sending funds indirectly to the recipient through a "sponsoring church".

III. COOPERATION PERVERSIONS.

A. Examples of the "Sponsoring Church" Arrangement.

- 1. Some brethren attended "Cooperative Meetings" in the 1830's. Some churches of Christ wanted a "sponsoring church" in Indiana in 1839, but the idea was abandoned and the Indiana State Missionary Society was created instead. Local churches in Texas (around 1867) were holding State Meetings in which the elders of one local church would be chosen to act as a "receiving, managing, and disbursing evangelistic committee". The Texas State Meeting in 1886 was called the "Texas State Christian Missionary Society". In 1910, the elders of the church in Henderson, Tn., proposed that money be sent to them from surrounding churches in order to evangelize

Western Tennessee in the "West Tennessee Cooperative". David Lipscomb opposed the Texas and Tennessee cooperative practices in the pages of the *Gospel Advocate*.

2. Some brethren wanted inter-congregational cooperation without ecclesiastical organization, so the following projects were born: Herald of Truth (1951), elders overseeing foreign churches and schools (1950's), World Wide Bible Study (1962), the Gospel Hour and Campaigns for Christ (1960's), and One Nation Under God (1991).
- B. "Sponsoring Church" Arguments Based Upon Human Reason.
1. "A total situation is scriptural if all the component parts of that situation are scriptural." This was the famous argument made in 1955 by Roy Deaver and Thomas Warren. It was heralded as "absolutely unanswerable and irresistible". Answer: Component parts may be scriptural, but when put together are no longer scriptural. For example, a local church may assemble, a local church may assemble daily, a local church may assemble to partake of the Lord's supper, but can a local church assemble daily to take the Lord's supper?
 2. "A local church, unaided by others, does not have the means to do the work God gave it to do (as per Mk. 16:15)." Answer: No local church has been charged with a "brotherhood work". Ability, plus opportunity, equals responsibility (note "according to ... ability" in Mt. 25:15; Acts 11:29; 2 Cor. 8:11). Responsibility is not determined by what we "assume" as our work. If the Lord had given a work which could not be accomplished by a local church, he would have designed a larger organization to do that work. He did not design an organization larger than the local church.
 3. "One local church may assume the oversight of a work that it cannot perform alone and calling upon other local churches to help." Answer: A local church may "assume" this work, but it has not been assigned this work by the Lord.
 4. "The sponsoring church arrangement is simply an expedient, a method. It is a good work. It is 'the best way to do it'." Answer: Before something can be "expedient" or a "good work", it must first be authorized either generically or specifically. The "method" is not the issue, the organizational arrangement (structure) is the issue.
 5. "There is no exclusive pattern of church cooperation taught in the Bible." Answer: The pattern is stated above under II.A and II.B and it is a specific pattern, not generic. The type of cooperation (concurrent) is specified and is the same for benevolence, evangelism, and edification (see II. A., II.B., and II.C.). It is assumed by "sponsoring church" advocates that since there are many examples of cooperation (some for benevolence, some for evangelism, and some for edification) that there is no pattern at all. It is assumed that a "pattern" means "only one way of doing a thing." Is there a "pattern" for salvation? Yes, but there are different things done by the alien sinner vs. the erring Christian.
 6. "Why may local churches send to local churches for physical needs (benevolence), but not for spiritual needs (evangelism)? Are physical needs more important than

spiritual needs?" Answer: We follow one pattern for benevolence and one pattern for evangelism because that is the way it is set forth in the NT.

7. "Church A may invite churches B and C to cooperate with church A. If churches B and C voluntarily accept this invitation, no autonomy has been violated and no independence has been lost." Answer: Oversight of funds has been lost whether you volunteer to give it up or you are forced. This issue is not voluntary "transfer of funds", but oversight of funds. The arrangement is still unscriptural even if churches volunteer to take part in it. Consider the example of parents raising children. Is it ok for parents to let other people raise their children as long as the parents voluntarily consent to others raising their children? No.
8. "The 'sponsoring church' is nothing more than a local church at work." Answer: No, the money received is coming from brethren who are not members of that local church. Both the "sponsoring church(es)" and the "contributing church(es)" claim that it is their own work. How can that be? Whose work is it?
9. "We believe in cooperation, but some brethren are just anti-cooperation." Answer: We believe whole-heartedly in cooperation. However, we also believe that the right type of cooperation must be done according to the NT pattern. Are those opposed to adulterous marriages, anti-marriage? Are those opposed to instrumental music, anti-music? Are those opposed to "faith only" salvation, anti-faith? Etc.

C. Arguments Based Upon Perverted Passages.

1. "The church at Antioch sent funds to the elders at Jerusalem who in turn distributed the funds to the churches of Judea (Acts 11:29-30)." Answer: This is an assumption without proof. The funds were sent directly to those in need in Judea. The funds were sent where the need existed; sent directly to the elders; therefore, sent directly to the elders in need in Judea.
2. "The 'messengers of the churches' mentioned in 2 Corinthians 8:16ff functioned in the same way as a 'sponsoring church' does today." Answer: This is an assumption without proof. Look at the details of what these messengers did (transport funds) and what sponsoring church elders do (oversee funds) and you will see that there is no parallel at all. It must be noted that the same passage was used by J.W. Briney in 1908 to justify the Missionary Society. Now which is it, the "sponsoring church" or the Missionary Society? Many brethren who support sponsoring churches, oppose the Missionary Society. Why?
3. "Other churches (2 Cor. 11:8-9) sent funds to Philippi (Phil. 4:15-16) who in turn sent it to Paul in Corinth (Acts 18:5)." Answer: This is an assumption without proof. It cannot be proved that Philippians 4:15-16 refers to a contribution to Paul after he left Thessalonica. It cannot be proved that Philippians 4:15-16 and 2 Corinthians 11:8-9 refer to the same event or the same contribution. It cannot be proved that "giving and receiving" (Phil. 4:15b) refers to Philippi "receiving" funds from churches and then "giving" them to Paul while he was at Corinth.

D. "Sponsoring Church" Problems.

1. It involves a perversion of the elders' office, function, and authority (see Lesson 1).
2. It violates the autonomy, equality, and the all-sufficiency of local churches (see Lesson 1).
3. It activates (in an unscriptural manner) local churches through a single, centralized agency (see Lesson 2) and it is not according to the NT pattern of local church cooperation.
4. It assumes a "responsibility" ("brotherhood project") that a local church does not have.
5. It makes the elders of a local church the same thing as a board of directors of a "Missionary Society" (one group of men making decisions concerning the money sent to them from various churches). As much as "sponsoring church" brethren don't like it, it is true that the sponsoring church and the missionary society are the same in principle.

IV CONCLUSION.

- A. Local Churches Today Can Cooperate Without Centralization (a "Sponsoring Church").
- B. Concurrent Local Church Cooperation According to the NT Pattern Is: 1) Scriptural, 2) Effective, 3) A Safe-Guard Against Apostasy Through Centralization, and, 4) Genuine Cooperation.
- C. Local Churches Must Not Ignore the "How" of Cooperation, Nor the Urgency of Cooperation. Some Brethren Today Remember the Urgency, But Ignore the "How". Let Us All Do God's Work, In God's Way!

Lesson Three Discussion

1. What is, and is not, the issue over local church cooperation?
2. What two kinds (types) of cooperation are there, and which kind (type) is found in the NT?
3. The cooperation among local churches in the NT in the areas of benevolence, evangelism, and edification have what factor in common?
4. What is the "sponsoring church" arrangement and what kind (type) of cooperation is it?
5. What NT passages have been used to justify the "sponsoring church"-type of cooperation and how are these passages perverted?
6. What problems are caused by the "sponsoring church"-type of cooperation?
7. How can local churches do God's work in God's way?