

Lesson 4: The Sponsoring Church

INTRODUCTION:

- 1. We have been addressing the issues that have caused division among our brethren and God's answer to them revealed in His word.
 - ● A. These issues are (chart "The Issues.")
 - B. The issue that I would like to address today is the sponsoring church (SC).
- 2. Though you may be unfamiliar with the term and the principles behind it, there are 100's, maybe more among "churches of Christ." And, some of the more prominent ones are...
 - A. TV Programs: 1) In SEARCH of the Lord's Way (Edmond church of Christ, Edmond, OK); Global Broadcasting Network (Southaven Church of Christ, Southaven, Mississippi)
 - B. House to House – Heart to Heart [Customizable magazine to mass mail for evangelistic purposes] (Jacksonville church of Christ, Jacksonville, AL)
 - C. Sunset International Bible Institute [oversees teaching/schools/training programs for preachers/Christians/lost all over the world] (Sunset Church of Christ, Lubbock, TX)
 - D. The Gospel of Christ (TGOE) evangelistic program for radio/TV/Internet/Media (Central church of Christ, McMinnville, TN).
- 3. In this lesson I want to consider what the sponsoring church is, why it has caused division, and what God's word has to say about it.

BODY:

- I. **The sponsoring church:**
 - A. Defined:
 - 1. **Lewis G. Hale:** "There are churches known as 'sponsoring churches.' Feeling that they are **not financially able** to carry on a certain program single-handedly, they **invite sister congregations to share the expense of that work**. They receive funds from other churches and add these to whatever funds they themselves provide for the work and they become **wholly responsible for the oversight of the work.**" (*How Churches Can Cooperate, God's Work In God's Way*, p. 3)
 - 2. **J. D. Thomas:** "Sponsoring Church Arrangement": "One congregation that especially **oversees a project**, such as a mission activity, in which other congregations **have an interest** and to which they **voluntarily contribute regularly**...The fact that **other churches contribute to a project that is overseen by the elders of one church** is the central idea." (*We Be Brethren*, p. 255)
 - 3. See chart – the SC illustrated and explained.
 - ● a. Church sees work it desires to do, but which is far larger than it is capable of doing.
 - b. Chooses to assume oversee of this work as a sponsoring church, knowing far more funds are needed than what it has.
 - c. Other churches are solicited to contribute funds to this church to do this work.
 - d. The work becomes a *multi-church project*, or the work of many churches, being overseen by the sponsoring eldership.
 - 4. Something that is missing from the definitions above and even this illustration is that it was fueled by questionable motivations.
 - a. First, brethren wanted to do more for God and the Great Commission than they felt was being done or even **could be done** as the church was currently **organized**.
 - b. Second, brethren felt the **local church**, God's revealed organization for collective works, was **insufficient to fulfill the Great Commission**.
 - c. So, the SC was brethren's supposed *scriptural* answer for harnessing the power [funds] of multiple churches to preach the gospel on a much bigger and *more efficient* scale than the local church alone could do.
 - d. These particular motivating factors were not new.
 - B. There is a history of brethren desiring to overcome the organizational "limitations" of God's local churches to do things on a much bigger scale.

- 1. In 1849 these same motivations resulted in the creation of the Missionary Society, which we discussed in the previous lesson.
 - a. Here brethren sought to centralized control of the local churches' funds under a *board of directors* called the MS.
 - b. They did this to be able to preach the gospel on a much bigger and more efficient scale.
 - c. Yet, division followed because there was no biblical authority for such an organization.
 - 2. In 1910 an effort was again made to centralize control of the funds of churches of Christs, but this time through a SC arrangement.
 - a. Preachers and elders met in Henderson, TN, at or near the campus of Freed Hardeman College to try to work out the details.
 - b. Brethren objected, and that attempt was defeated by sound biblical reasoning/teaching mainly from D. Lipscomb and the GA.
 - c. **David Lipscomb**: "All meetings of churches or officers of churches to combine more power than a single church possesses is wrong. God's power is in God's churches. He is with them to bless and strengthen their work when they are faithful to him...But for one or more to direct what and how all the churches shall work, or to take charge of their men and money and use it, is to **assume the authority God has given to each church**. Each one needs the work of distributing and using its funds as well as in giving them." (**Gospel Advocate**, March 24, 1910).
 - ● 3. In the late 1940's after **WWII** ended and American soldiers returned from seeing a world full of lost souls, certain brethren seized the opportunity, and the SC idea was revived and began to gain a foothold among churches of Christ.
 - a. The **Broadway church** in Lubbock, Texas, wanted to evangelize **Germany** and decided to **oversee all efforts for churches of Christ** in that country.
 - i. So, **one eldership** sought to take upon itself the work of overseeing the evangelism efforts in Germany for all the "**churches of Christ**."
 - b. The **Union Ave. church** in Memphis, TN, became the SC for evangelizing **Japan**.
 - 4. So, the debates over the same sort of issues that surrounded the MS returned and when it was seen that biblical authority was not sufficiently provided and the SC was not going away, division followed.
- C. To understand why all this happened, it is important to know:
- 1. What **were not** the issues:
 - a. Should the gospel be preached?
 - b. May churches cooperate?
 - c. Number of churches involved
 - d. May we use means and methods
 - e. May the gospel be preached in various ways?
 - f. Whether some good is done
 - g. Are congregational responsibilities being fulfilled?
 - 2. What **were** the issues:
 - a. Must we follow the N.T. pattern for preaching the gospel?
 - b. May a local church choose to take upon itself a work larger than that local church can support, and to which all churches are equally responsible, while in doing so choosing to become dependent on other churches to fund this work?
 - c. May many churches do their work "through" a sponsoring church?
 - d. May the elders of one church oversee any part of the work of another church and/or oversee multi-church works?
- **II. God's word and the sponsoring church:**
- A. The SC arrangement assumes that the local church's responsibility to preach the gospel is greater than the local church can accomplish on its own.
 - 1. The argument made in debates, etc.:

- a. The Great Commission requires us to preach the gospel to every person in every place.
 - b. No local church has the money/resources to do this work alone.
 - c. Therefore, local churches **must pool their resources/money (under the oversight of a sponsoring church)** to fulfill the Great Commission.
2. **God's TRUTH, however, concludes:**
- a. Therefore, it is the responsibility of each local church to preach the gospel as far and wide **as its resources will allow**.
 - b. For, the gospel was preached to the whole world **without churches pooling their money under the centralized control** of a SC or MS, etc.
 - i. Col. 1:5-6 – “because of the hope laid up for you in heaven, of which you previously heard in the word of truth, the gospel ⁶ which has come to you, **just as in all the world**”
 - ii. Col. 1:23 – “...the hope of the gospel that you have heard, which was proclaimed in all creation under heaven...”
- 3. What few see or will openly admit is that the above argument is denies the sufficiency of God's Plan to do His work:
 - a. 1) God has given local churches a work to do (evangelism) that they cannot possibly accomplish through the God-given organization of those local churches.
 - b. 2) God has commanded a work of local churches and left those churches without revelation as to how to accomplish that work.
 - c. 3) Therefore, God's plan requires **human wisdom** to concoct some organizational plan that is **better** than what He has revealed so we can accomplish the work given the churches.
 - d. If we ignore the arrogance of this approach, we must still ask how it fits with the purpose of scripture? (2 Tim. 3:16-17 – “All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.”)
- B. Another biblical problem with the SC is that the Bible says NOTHING about harnessing churches together in this way. In other words, it is without Bible authority.
- 1. There is no **express statement, direct command, approved example**, nor **inescapable conclusion** authorizing the sponsoring church arrangement.
 - a. **Mark Roberts:** “The most basic objection to this sponsoring church arrangement was, and remains, that there is **simply nothing said in scripture of churches ever being pulled together into such an arrangement**. There is **no pattern** for this **harness**, no **provision** for how it is to be **managed**, or **who is to oversee it**. There is no ‘book, chapter, and verse’ for the sponsoring church arrangement.” (“Mutual Fund Christianity,” *Abundant Life*, Oct., 1996, 29:10:4)
 - b. Every part of this arrangement is simply *assumed* to be acceptable without scripture.
 - 2. No biblical authority for a N.T. church to *assume* oversight of a work it cannot fund/do.
 - a. “**Opportunity** (Gal. 6:10) + **Ability** (Acts 11:29) = **Responsibility** (i.e., to do what one's ability permits – 2 Cor. 8:12)”
 - i. Opportunity: Gal. 6:10 – “Therefore, as we have **opportunity**, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith.”
 - ii. Ability: Acts 11:29 – “Then the disciples, **each according to his ability**, determined to send relief to the brethren dwelling in Judea.”
 - iii. Responsibility to act on an opportunity is directly related to the ability to do it: 2 Cor. 8:12 – “For if the readiness is present, it is acceptable according to **what a person has, not according to what he does not have**.”
 - b. There simply is no biblical authority for a local church claiming it is its **responsibility** to assume oversight of an **opportunity/work** which **it cannot afford, or has no ability** to do, with the intent of becoming dependent on the funds of other churches to do it!

- c. **E. R. Harper:** “A congregation has no right to build anything larger than it is able to support. It has no right whatever to bind any other congregation to any program of work of its own selection. Each congregation must retain its autonomy. Any effort that destroys the independence of a local congregation runs straight toward sectarianism, if not Romanism.” (via Britnell, “The Sponsoring Church,” p. 2)
- 3. There is no biblical authority for a N.T. church to work *through* another church.
 - a. No church ever sponsored a work so that other churches could do their work through it!
 - b. No N.T. church ever did its work **through** another church.
 - c. There were no middleman organizations between the churches and the work they did.
 - d. Churches in the N.T. did their work by meeting needs directly.
 - i. In preaching the gospel, churches **sent money directly to the preacher:**
 - 1) Phil. 4:15-16 – “You yourselves also know, Philipians, that at the first preaching of the gospel, after I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving but you alone; ¹⁶ for even in Thessalonica you sent a gift more than once for my needs.”
 - 2) 2 Cor. 11:8 – “I robbed other churches by taking wages from them to serve you”
 - ii. In doing **benevolence** (Acts 11:27-30 – “Now at this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. ²⁸ One of them named Agabus stood up and began to indicate by the Spirit that there would certainly be a great famine all over the world. And this took place in the reign of Claudius. ²⁹ And in the proportion that any of the disciples had means, each of them determined to send a contribution for the relief of the brethren living in Judea. ³⁰ And this they did, sending it in charge of Barnabas and Saul to the **elders.**”).
 - e. **What is the difference?**
 - i. Sending directly has authority, sending through a church does not
 - ii. Churches did their work of evangelism and benevolence by meeting the need directly.
- C. The SC violates the **biblical limitations of elders** and their authority.
 - 1. Biblical elders:
 - a. God’s revealed pattern is each local church having its own *eldership* to oversee its affairs.
 - b. Elders are to be “appointed in every church,” as did Paul and Barnabas (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5).
 - c. All elderships must meet the same qualifications (Titus 1:6-9; 1 Tim. 3:1-7). So, no biblical eldership is more qualified to do any biblical work than any other eldership.
 - d. Each eldership’s work and oversight are limited to the affairs of the flock of God which is among them (1 Pet. 5:1-2 – “Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, ² **shepherd the flock of God among you**, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness”).
 - e. Thus, all elderships are *equal* in their qualifications, responsibilities, and authority.
 - i. Elders are *equally limited* to overseeing the people, work, worship, and funds of the local flock among which they work.
 - ii. No eldership is authorized to assume oversight of the people, work, worship, or funds of another local flock(s) as is done in the SC arrangement.
 - 2. That the SC arrangement violates God’s limitations on local elderships is openly stated by its defenders/proponents.
 - a. The SC by nature involves an eldership assuming oversight of a work that is **larger than that of a local church.**
 - i. ONUG was a SC program overseen by a church here in Cookeville, TN, back in the late 80’s, early 90’s.
 - 1) Its goal was to preach the gospel to ever household in the US and the world.

- 2) This church sent out a notice to churches of Christ entitled “Four Months Until The Deadline”
- 3) It stated: “Christians deserve the opportunity to participate in something bigger than a budget, larger than the local work.”
- ii. Since the SC is a work is admittedly “bigger than a [local] budget, larger than a local work,” or flock, who is biblically qualified to oversee it?
 - 1) Not elders (1 Pet. 5:1-2)!
 - 2) So, those acting as overseers of the sponsoring church arrangement are not acting as **elders**—they have stepped out of that biblical role.
- b. The SC defenders readily admit that it involves the sponsoring eldership overseeing the **work of “churches of Christ.”**
 - i. **EX: The Herald of Truth** was a SC radio program was the work of 100s of churches and began in the late 1940’s or early 1950’s and was overseen by the Highland church of Christ in Abilene, Texas.
 - 1) **James W. Nichols:** “It is the largest radio effort ever attempted by the **churches of Christ**. The entire work is **under the supervision of the elders of the Highland Church**, Abilene, Texas.” (*Preachers of Today*, 1952)
 - 2) So, this was a work of “churches of Christ” overseen by one eldership!
 - ii. Where in the N.T. is there authority for an eldership overseeing the work of “churches of Christ”?
 - 1) Elders are local in position and authority (Acts 14:23; 1 Pet. 5:1-3)!
 - 2) The truth is that the SC arrangement simply **replaced the MS and its board of directors** with a **local church** and the men who made up its **eldership**.
 - 3) I say “the men who made up the eldership” because as soon as they men assumes the role of overseeing a multi-church work, they stop acting as elders and became a Missionary Society board of directors under the guise of a local church.
- D. The SC is wrong because it violates the biblical concept of local church *autonomy/independence*.
 - 1. **Autonomy:** “The condition or quality of being self-governing.” (*The American Heritage Dictionary*)
 - 2. To be *autonomous* in doing its work, lets say in preaching of the gospel, a local church must decide for itself:
 - a. What form of preaching it will do?
 - b. Who will do the preaching?
 - c. Where the preaching will take place?
 - d. How much support for preaching will be supplied?
 - e. How long this preaching work will last? Etc.
 - 3. The SC violates God’s guidelines for local church autonomy because the supporting congregations give the oversight of their work over to the sponsoring church overseers.
 - a. Proponents of the SC readily admit this. Ex: **Herald of Truth**
 - i. **Lewis Hale:** “There are hundreds of churches which send financial aid to help keep the program on the air. **They have no part in the management of the program.** They have no part in the selection of the preacher, singers, nor sermon topics. Their part is solely that of financial assistance.” (*How Churches Can Cooperate*, p. 2)
 - ii. When churches support a SC program, they willingly become dependent on the SC to oversee their money and make the decisions needed to complete the work.
 - b. The SC has the same biblical problems that were true of the MS, which is that it creates a **middleman organization that takes oversight of the funds and work of the contributing churches.**
 - c. The contributing churches willingly give up their autonomy, their oversight of their work, to the SC.

- ● E. Some try to defend the SC by denying the loss of local church autonomy because the contributing churches give *voluntarily*:
 - 1. Argument: Local church autonomy is maintained in a SC arrangement because churches participate *voluntarily* and can pull out of the arrangement at any time.
 - 2. Truth: Voluntary participation means autonomy is voluntarily given up.
 - a. **Mark Roberts**: “An illustration may help. If I take \$5000 and invest it in a mutual fund I still have the right to pull my money out at any time. However, I have forfeited my right to manage my money. The fund manager now makes all decisions about what to do with my \$5000. I cannot call the fund manager and tell him how to invest that money, or to buy a certain stock, or stay away from a company’s stock. The fund manager does the managing (overseeing) of the money, not me. All I can do is send the fund money, or get out of the fund. I have zero authority over my money while it is in the fund. I cannot control it, or direct it.” (Quoted in Mark Roberts, “Mutual Fund Christianity,” *Abundant Life*, Oct., 1996, 29:10:5)
 - b. **Mark Roberts**: “The sponsoring church arrangement creates a church mutual fund. Churches pool their money together, and the elders of the sponsoring church manage that money. The key is that while a church is in the ‘fund’ they have no control or oversight of their money. The elders of the sponsoring church do all the deciding. They decide who to put on the TV program, or what to write in the mass mail-out brochure. **In other words, they make all the decisions that each local church’s elders are supposed to make!** All the elders of the paying churches can do is get in or get out, but while **in** they have given up their control and thus forfeited their autonomy. Remember, autonomy means ‘independence and self-control’. When you have lost your control you have lost your autonomy.” (Quoted in Mark Roberts, “Mutual Fund Christianity,” *Abundant Life*, Oct., 1996, 29:10:5)
- F. The sponsoring church leads to Romanism:
 - 1. **Bill Hall**: “If some of the evangelistic efforts of some of the churches can be done under one eldership, then why could not all of the evangelistic efforts of all the churches be done under one eldership? **Why couldn’t we just place all the evangelistic efforts of churches of Christ under one eldership?** Why would we not be able to do that?” (*Restudying Issues Of The ‘50’s And ‘60’s,*” p. 24)
 - 2. The SC opens the door for all the work of all the churches of Christ to be overseen by one church, which is **Roman Catholicism**.
 - 3. Though brethren will try to brush this off as extreme, or crazy, if not, why not?

CONCLUSION:

1. The SC arrangement not only has no biblical authority, it denies the sufficiency of God’s revealed plan while also violating many of the biblically established principles applied to the local church and its eldership.
2. Thus, those who support these arrangements and press them upon local churches of Christ are doing so in violation of Biblical authority and are ultimately the cause of division in the Lord’s church!
3. We must avoid caving into the pressure to conform, to downplay the differences in the institutional-non-institutional churches, and must stand strong in the ways of the Lord and do the Lord’s work in the Lord’s way.
4. Will you come to Jesus today?