

The Potential Christian Cooperative Movement

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Abstract:

In recent years, politics in the US has become seriously divided between two large and complex groups which may simplistically be referred to as “Christian” and “secular.” Each has generally been closely aligned with one of the two major political parties, and because these groups are entrenched and evenly balanced, it has resulted in a stalemate that is focused on a few issues, including sexual morality, and which has generally hindered the function of government.

While these two groups are generally viewed as inherently antagonistic, cooperatives provide an important opportunity to find common ground for collaboration. This paper will focus on specific examples of the potential for collaboration, and while it is the result of more than a year of exploration, it cannot fully capture the complexity of the subject. Rather, it will seek to provide a layperson’s perspective of some developments which bear further exploration. Special attention will be paid to the Emerging Church and to recent trends within Evangelical Christianity, which is in the midst of a reconfiguration as many individuals and congregations increasingly question the coercive politics of the religious right.

Issues to be explored include: 1) what sort of Biblical case can be made for cooperatives; 2) what historical movements, including modern cooperatives, have already organized in this way based on Christian values; 3) how can cooperatives serve as a means for us to agree to disagree where necessary, so we can focus government energy on areas in which there is general consensus; and 4) what current trends support or hinder the creation of a faith-based current within the cooperative movement of the US and elsewhere.

Part I: The Bible as a story of organization

The Bible is a powerful book, which can be used to support a number of sometimes contradictory viewpoints. It can be read in a wide variety of ways, and it is important not to claim that it has a single meaning.

For the purposes of this section, I am going to take it as it is claimed to be by many: A literal and accurate history of the relationship between God and God's people. Because this paper is about the potential for a cooperative transformation of how Christians organize, it is essential to begin our exploration from within the mainstream of that perspective.

I attempt to capture one aspect of the overall narrative of the Bible. I do not presume that this story is the point of the Bible, or even that it is the only story of the Bible. Instead, I look at the big picture of how events unfold, in an effort to determine whether there is a pattern about what forms of human organizing seem more or less pleasing to God. Some of the clues that I will use to discern this include the relative peace or instability which accompanies an arrangement, as well as God's own words. I have attempted to present a representative sample of passages which provide the most clarity from each of several phases of the narrative.

I generally will steer clear of questions of what the Bible tells people to do, and focus on how it tells us to do it. That is, I will focus on the process by which God's will is to be carried out, rather than the details of what that will is. I will also try to avoid discussion of how doctrine and ritual are established, in order to focus on what we currently recognize as business or political decisions.

I will look at three main aspects of cooperation. First, the sharing of resources. Second, the inclusiveness of how decisions are made about what is right behavior. And finally, the means of enforcement of those standards. These are often not distinct from one another, but are taken together as an area of interest, in order to answer the question of how does the Bible instruct Christians to organize their society?

The answer is clear: Resources should be voluntarily shared as much as possible in order to make sure that everyone's basic needs are met. Power should not be concentrated. And the decision to act rightly lies between the individual and God, with only weak justification for coercive enforcement. My intent is to establish a Biblical precedent for certain ways of making decisions, rather than argue for what the results of that decision-making should be. The essence of cooperation is not what people do, but how they do it together.

When we look at the general flow of the Bible, and the ways in which people organize throughout the story that it tells, there is a progression toward more responsibility, more freedom, and more opportunity to screw up and be forgiven.

This section is meant to provide an understanding of what the Bible says about how Christians should organize, and so it relies heavily on quotations. Some of these are quite lengthy, as the

stories they tell cannot be reduced to a single sentence. The Bible is a mammoth set of writings, with nearly 800,000 words, and so it is difficult to boil down. So while I have left out many passages which indirectly address the subject at hand, this section is still quite long. I am making a claim that is well outside the mainstream understanding, and that requires substantial documentation.

For this section, I read the *New Living Translation* of the Bible with an eye for mentions of social organization. I did not include the books of Psalms and Proverbs in this survey, because they are not part of the narrative and seemed unlikely to yield much information

Lessons from Jesus

Economics and justice were major themes in Jesus' words. His teachings were full of stories which drew lessons from the ways that people made a living and lived together. Among His first words were "God blesses those who are hungry and thirsty for justice, for they will receive it in full." (Matt. 5:6) His two great commandments were to love God, and the very non-competitive direction to "Love your neighbor as yourself." (Mark 12:31).

His actions provide an example of how morals should be maintained, in the story of the woman who was to be stoned for committing adultery. Although she was caught red-handed, he saves her by demanding that the first stone be thrown by someone who is without sin, with the implication that there is no such person and therefore no grounds for execution. (John 8:1-11)

It is not hard to discern a general tendency toward restoration and justice. However, these many teachings do not give clear collective directions. However, there are a small handful of cases in which Jesus clearly gives instructions to how people should act together. Taken together, they suggest that it is not good for power to be concentrated in only a few human hands.

"You know that in this world kings are tyrants and officials lord it over the people beneath them. But among you it should be quite different. Whoever wants to be a leader among you must first be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must become your slave." (Matt 20:25-27)

This tells us that it is wrong to give power to officials in the way of the world. This does not rule out leadership or authority, but it does present a picture that is difficult to reconcile with an exclusive and sometimes wealthy clergy in control of a congregation.

Another passage goes much farther: "If another believer sins against you, go privately and point out the fault. If the other person listens and confesses it, you have won that person back. But if you are unsuccessful, take one or two others with you and go back again, so that everything you say may be confirmed by two or three witnesses. If that person still refuses to listen, take your case to the church. If the church decides you are right, but the other person won't accept it, treat that person as a pagan or a corrupt tax collector. I tell you this: Whatever you prohibit on earth is prohibited in heaven, and whatever you allow on earth is allowed in heaven." (Matt. 18:15-18)

This instructs us to rely on a sort of conflict resolution, in which the offender must ultimately be persuaded that they are in the wrong. At worst, the offender is subject to exclusion from the community, although this is not clear because Jesus often spent time with tax collectors.

To make any sort of collective enforcement even more tricky, Jesus continues: “I also tell you this: If two of you agree down here on earth concerning anything you ask, my Father in heaven will do it for you. For where two or three gather together because they are mine, I am there among them.” (Matt 18:19-20) This seems to indicate that if even the smallest group of believers agree on something, it is good enough for God. This is nearly impossible to reconcile with most of the centralized forms that Christianity has taken after it was adopted as the state religion of the Roman Empire.

However, this does recognize that God will speak to people who we might not recognize as leaders, and it is important to have things set up in a way that that can be discerned and acted upon when that happens. If all ideas are generated by the king, for example, it would be very difficult to recognize that God is actually speaking through a servant.

Acts of the first Christians

The book of Acts begins immediately after the crucifixion and resurrection, and is the Bible’s only general account of the first days of Christianity. The remainder of the New Testament is a series of letters—usually focused on a specific issue facing one of the several related but autonomous churches that were already beginning to develop their own separate traditions—followed by the book of predictions called Revelation. Only Acts serves as a canonized history of the first Church. And from the start, that history was on a collision course with power.

After Jesus’ death, there came a period of forty days in which Jesus continued to appear from time to time before He abruptly rose into the sky and was gone. Just more than a week later, the Pentecost miracles occurred, and it was one of the most dramatic stories in the New Testament. The incident happened as the believers were gathered for a festival of the first harvest. This would probably have been the first large gathering of Jesus’ followers after His departure; they had largely scattered in the wake of their leader’s execution. In any case, it was quite a party. The miracles of that day included some sort of heavenly flame settling on each person’s head, and the ability to speak in unknown languages (Acts 2:1-13).

Once things quieted down a bit, Peter hopped up and apparently did some powerful preaching. Unfortunately, much of the sermon is reduced to the simple summary that he “continued preaching for a long time, strongly urging all his listeners, ‘Save yourselves from this generation that has gone astray!’” But between the miracles and whatever he said, three thousand people were inspired to convert that day. (Acts 2:40-42) And in the immediate aftermath of this key moment in the birth of the church that it becomes clear that something very unusual was happening economically, as well as spiritually. “And all the believers met together constantly and shared everything they had.

They sold their possessions and shared the proceeds with those in need." (Acts 2:44-45)

This development is important enough to soon be mentioned again, with some elaboration on its impact: "There was no poverty among them, because people who owned land or houses sold them and brought the money to the apostles to give to others in need." (Acts 4:34-35)

What are we to make of this behavior? On the one hand, they were living in a very different culture than our own, so we should not read too much into it. A small religious group facing persecution in the wake of its leader's execution would likely pull together to face a threatening future together. Perhaps this was common behavior among new religious groups of that time. Certainly there are many historic and contemporary examples of communally-organized sects.

However, the next chapter provides a clear indication that this sharing was a development of great spiritual importance; the story of Ananias and Sapphira shows us what happens when someone is not forthcoming about what they have to offer.

There was also a man named Ananias who, with his wife Sapphira, sold some property. He brought part of the money to the apostles but he claimed it was the full amount. His wife had agreed to the deception.

Then Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart? You lied to the Holy Spirit, and you kept some of the money for yourself. The property was yours to sell or not sell, as you wished. And after selling it, the money was yours to give away. How could you do a thing like this? You weren't lying to us but to God."

As soon as Ananias heard these words, he fell to the floor and died. Everyone who heard about it was terrified. Then some young men wrapped him in a sheet and took him out and buried him."

About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. Peter asked her, "Was this the price you and your husband received for your land?"

"Yes, she replied, "that was the price."

And Peter said, "How could the two of you even think of doing a thing like this -- conspiring together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Just outside that door are the young men who buried your husband, and they will carry you out, too."

Instantly, she fell to the floor and died. When the young men came in and saw that she was dead, they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. Great fear gripped the entire church and all others who heard what had happened. (Acts 5:1-10)

The two are struck dead on the spot—the only New Testament characters to receive such

immediate and severe punishment. And this is for violating a rule that is not a requirement.

This verse is often cited as an illustration of why it is bad to lie. But that lesson could have been delivered for any of a number of offenses—adultery, theft, or simply being dishonest about one's true level of faith. It is unlikely that this was the only lie told by believers during this period. Peter himself had denied knowing Jesus three times (John 18:15-27). However, this most extreme of punishments was reserved for being uncooperative—for failing to share. And it should be emphasized that Peter took the trouble to remind Ananias that the whole arrangement was voluntary.

So what are we to make of this? Clearly there was some sort of fervor surrounding this movement that was following this new messiah. And even though it was not necessary to release one's property to join the new church, there seems to have been considerable desire to do so.

This sort of arrangement, in practice, is problematic. Just throwing resources into a common pot is challenging even among small homogenous groups with a stable membership. So in this large and rapidly growing movement, facing all sorts of internal and external challenges, one might expect difficulties to arise. And sure enough, in the very next chapter, ethnic divisions begin to develop between the Greeks and Hebrews regarding the distribution of food.

So the Twelve called a meeting of all the believers. “We apostles should spend our time preaching and teaching the word of God, not administering a food program,” they said. “Now look around among yourselves, brothers, and select seven men who are well respected and are full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom. We will put them in charge of this business. Then we can spend our time in prayer and preaching and teaching the word.” (Acts 6:2-4)

Not only this, but they called for the election of a multiple leaders. Whatever their reasoning, this quickly proved to be a wise move. The list of leaders begins with Stephen, who is described as being “full of faith and the Holy Spirit.” (Acts 6:5) Presumably he would have won election to a single position. But almost immediately he is arrested and executed. If he had been in a position of unique power, they would have had to start from scratch. By raising up a group of leaders, they strengthened their hand considerably.

At this point, it seems that they were forming what has its modern equivalent in the cooperative: A body with economic purposes that is owned and democratically controlled by its members, who join voluntarily and contribute what they can; it came complete with a board of directors.

While the spiritual leadership was, in effect, chosen by God, the Apostles realized that their responsibilities were of the spirit and not of the purse. Perhaps motivated by Jesus' encouragement to "give to Caesar what belongs to him" (Matt 22:21) or by the memory of how he drove the merchants from the Temple (John 2:15-16) they created a separation of powers. They avoided involvement with financial affairs. And they realized that it was important to have the financial

leadership be accountable to the community. Furthermore, the control was not given to those who brought more resources to the table, as is usually done in the modern business world. Power was shared among *all the believers*.

It seemed as though the earliest believers were well on their way toward creating the economy for the Kingdom of Heaven, in preparation for the return of Jesus. But from our current perspective it is clear that they strayed from this path somewhere. Somehow this system fell apart.

There are still many questions unanswered: Why was there such an emphasis on economic issues and sharing power? Why did the apostles call for seven leaders instead of one? And what did Peter say in his Pentecost sermon, which is strangely reduced to a short paraphrase? In what ways had the current generation gone astray?

We can find clues in the teachings that were familiar to members of this movement, as well as its messiah. For this, we return to the beginning of the story, in the Old Testament.

Origins

At first glance, the Old Testament is full of prophets and kings telling people what to do, and does not seem to reflect a participatory culture. Nevertheless, we can excavate the foundation for what is to come in the teachings of Jesus and the acts of his followers. And when we look at how people are organized in these accounts, we see several patterns: First, when power is concentrated in the hands of a single ruler, things go worse than when power is spread out among the people. And second, God prefers that people treat each other justly, in ways that minimize suffering.

These lessons shine through most clearly when we look at how the people implement the law. The law does have its leanings toward collective economics—most notably the requirement that every seventh year be a jubilee in which debt is forgiven and slaves are freed. (Ex. 21:1-11 and Lev. 25) But because we do not currently have a universally recognized divine spokesperson like Moses, and because many forests have already fallen in our effort to interpret the content of God's will, I would like to keep the focus on how it is implemented.

The book of Exodus is the story of the birth of Israel as a nation. Prior to this birth, the Bible is the story of individuals and families, without much reference to the Jews' social structure. During the Exodus, there is little doubt that Moses is a father figure, dictating the will of the Lord. Even so, it does not take long for this newborn nation to develop some diffusion of responsibility. Two events are essential precedents for the Law and establish that God didn't want Moses to have to do it all alone.

First, as soon as God had taken care of the people's need for food and water, they were attacked by the Amalekites. As the battle began, Moses watched from a nearby hill, with the staff of God in his hand. "As long as Moses held up the staff with his hands, the Israelites had the advantage. But whenever he lowered his hands, the Amalekites gained the upper hand. Moses' arms finally

became too tired to hold up the staff any longer. So Aaron and Hur found a stone for him to sit on. Then they stood on each side, holding up his hands until sunset. As a result, Joshua and his troops were able to crush the army of Amalek.” (Ex. 17:11-13)

Next, Moses received a visit from his father-in-law, Jethro.

When Moses’ father-in-law saw all that Moses was doing for the people, he said, “Why are you trying to do this alone? The people have been standing here all day to get your help.”

Moses replied, “Well, the people come to me to seek God’s guidance. When an argument arises, I am the one who settles the case. I inform the people of God’s decisions and teach them his laws and instructions.

“This is not good!” his father-in-law exclaimed. “You’re going to wear yourself out—and the people too. This job is too heavy a burden for you to handle by yourself. Now let me give you a word of advice, and may God be with you. You should continue to be the people’s representative before God, bringing him their questions to be decided. You should tell them God’s decisions, teach them God’s laws and instructions, and show them how to conduct their lives. But find some capable, honest men who fear God and hate bribes. Appoint them as judges over groups of one thousand, one hundred, fifty and ten. These men can serve the people, resolving all the ordinary cases. Anything that is too important or too complicated can be brought to you. But they can take care of the smaller matters themselves. They will help you carry the load, making the task easier for you.” (Ex. 18:14-22)

These judges were selected by the people and are given clear instructions not to discriminate against foreigners or the poor (Deut. 1:9-18).

There is no direct description of how this worked out beyond a statement that this recommendation was implemented. Presumably it was not flawless in its execution, but generally went pretty well. The most striking result was that once Moses was freed from acting as judge from dawn to dusk, he became more available for communication from God. And that communication started with the Ten Commandments, and went from there. Moses had to get help before he could receive God’s instructions.

This is not to say that Moses was relinquishing authority. The delegation was for minor cases, which would be referred back to Moses as needed. There is another layer of delegation to Aaron, who takes on a priestly role while Moses focused on more general issues.

It is tempting to see this as the beginnings of power-sharing, and I would argue that it is the first glimmer of that. But God still preferred to have one person in charge during this phase of the nation’s development. It can be compared to the need for parents to keep their young children under control until they can develop more sense and responsibility. Even so, every parent knows

that kids rebel, which is a time-honored way of testing out the rules.

The firmness of the rules is confirmed by the account rebellion by Korah and several others, a substantial act of disobedience: “They incited a rebellion against Moses, involving 250 other prominent leaders, all members of the assembly.” (Num 16:2)

The grievance does not seem to be in response to a particular decision, but is a response to Moses’ power itself: “You have gone too far! Everyone in Israel has been set apart by the Lord, and he is with all of us. What right do you have to act as though you are greater than anyone else among all these people of the Lord?” (Num 16:3).

Apparently Moses had some right to act in this regard, since the story ends in the rebels being swallowed up by the earth, with a plague finishing off thousands of their relatives. So at this point, it is clear that the Israelites are not ready for popular rule.

This could be interpreted as an indication that God only wants one person in charge. But it is also possible that the problem was the clumsy way that they brought up their concerns. While Jethro brought his suggestion discreetly, it seems that Korah and his collaborators just dumped it all out in the open.

It is commonly held that crises demand stronger leadership. Given the precarious situation in which the Israelites found themselves and the lack of time to develop more complex systems, strong leadership would be necessary. And in any case, there was no room for extracurricular squabbling. So this punishment could be interpreted as God telling the kids to settle down and get back to work.

Another cooperative theme which makes its first appearance during the Exodus is that of voluntary contribution.

When it came time to build the Tabernacle, which was a very important task with extremely detailed and specific directions. Even so, there was no forced labor. “If their hearts were stirred and they desired to do so, they brought to the Lord their offerings of materials for the Tabernacle and its furnishings and for the holy garments.” (Ex. 35:20)

This sort of arrangement is often dismissed as idealistic, but in this case it worked well enough.

So Moses gave the command and this message was sent throughout the camp: “Bring no more materials! You have already brought more than enough.” So the people stopped bringing their offerings. Their contributions were more than enough to complete the whole project. (Ex. 36:6-7)

This indicates that if a project is worthwhile and has popular support, rigid enforcement may not be necessary. Another way to look at this is that if God wants something to happen, there should be

no need to force people to do it.

There was also sharing of income. When the Israelites were victorious in battle, all shared in the benefit. God instructed them to make an inventory. “Then divide the plunder into two parts and give half to the men who fought the battle, and half to the rest of the people.” (Num 31:27). They were further instructed to take the Lord’s share out of the army’s half.

To ensure fairness, it was necessary that the clans got off to an even start. When they arrived in the Promised Land, they were instructed to divide it among the clans “by sacred lot and in proportion to their size.” (Num 33:54) To maintain this fairness, women who were in line to inherit land were not allowed to marry outside of their clans. “No inheritance may pass from one tribe to another; each tribe of Israel must hold on to its allotted inheritance.” (Num 36:9)

After Moses died, leadership passed to the military leader Joshua, who oversaw the Israelite conquest of the holy land. Without Moses’ leadership, the Israelites went astray, worshipped idols, and were themselves conquered for a time before God raised up a series of judges to lead Israel for many generations. However, the people eventually succumbed to the temptation of having a single ruler.

Judges and Kings

The transition from judges to kings was an important one, because it captures the difference between leaders and rulers. The former is essential for any organization, including cooperatives. The latter is in conflict with cooperative values, and as the Bible confirms, it tends to have negative impacts on how well people get along.

There was no clear line of succession with judges, who were divinely appointed. They came from all ranks of society and even included a woman named Deborah, who freed Israel from another period of subjugation, and with a co-ruler oversaw forty years of peace.

There was not always a judge, and for significant periods Israel had to make do without this leadership: “Whenever the Lord placed a judge over Israel, he was with that judge and rescued the people from their enemies throughout that judge’s lifetime. For the Lord took pity on his people, who were burdened by oppression and suffering. But when the judge died, the people returned to their corrupt ways, behaving worse than those who had lived before them.” (Judges 2:18-19)

The clearest Biblical description of the difference between judges and kings is the statement found in several places, that “In those days Israel had no king, so the people did whatever seemed right in their own eyes.” (Judges 17:6, 19:1, 21:25)

So we see that the judge role is an organic one which provides needed leadership while not solidifying into a position that is essential to the daily running of affairs. Even though things went better when there was a judge, it was not an essential position, and certainly not one that had

hardened into an institution of its own. It was also not the position of a ruler; this is confirmed by one judge's response when asked to establish hereditary rule:

Then the Israelites said to Gideon, "Be our ruler! You and your son and your grandson will be our rulers, for you have rescued us from Midian."

But Gideon replied, "I will not rule over you, nor will my son. The Lord will rule over you!" (Judges 8: 22-23).

Even so, the next judge was one of Gideon's family. Abimelech killed all but one of his 70 half brothers, in a blatant power grab. This creeping monarchy was pointed out by the surviving brother, Jotham, who told a parable in which the trees were seeking a king: They first approached the olive, fig and grapevine; each declined in order to focus on doing useful work. So finally, they approached the thornbush, who was happy to oblige. (Judges 9:7-21)

This story did not sit well with Abimelech, and so Jotham then fled for his life. And after a few years, "God stirred up trouble between Abimelech and the people of Shechem, and they revolted. In the events that followed, God punished Abimelech and the men of Shechem for murdering Gideon's seventy sons." (Judges 9:23-24)

This story is important in that it shows that even a popularly chosen and divinely installed leader does not have a permanent mandate. Here is one case in which God clearly played a major role in overthrowing a leader. This is in contrast to the common notion that God has put rulers in place so they should not be challenged. It indicates that resistance, as well as government, is created by God.

This system did not always work perfectly, as some judges were better than others. However, there is a clear contrast with the later period of rule by kings. God foresaw that there might arise a desire for a strong ruler, and had previously warned that "If this happens, be sure that you select as king the man the Lord your God chooses. You must appoint a fellow Israelite, not a foreigner. The king must not build up a large stable of horses for himself... The king must not take many wives for himself, because they will lead him away from the Lord. And he must not accumulate vast amounts of wealth." (Deut 17:16-17)

Sure enough, after about a dozen judges came and went, the judge Samuel appointed his sons as judges when he retired. Unfortunately they turned out to be corrupt and the people requested a king so they could be like the other nations. God was clearly not thrilled to hear of this desire when it was relayed to him by Samuel.

"Do as they say," the Lord replied, "for it is me they are rejecting, not you. They don't want me to be their king any longer. Ever since I brought them from Egypt they have continually forsaken me and followed other gods. And now they are giving you the same treatment. Do as they ask, but solemnly warn them about the way a king will treat them."

So Samuel passed on the Lord's warning to the people who were asking him for a king. "This is how a king will treat you," Samuel said. "The king will draft your sons and make them run before his chariots. Some will be commanders of his troops, while others will be slave laborers. Some will be forced to plow his fields and harvest his crops, while other will make his weapons and chariot equipment. The king will take your daughters from you and force them to cook and bake and make perfumes for him. He will take away the best of your fields and vineyards and olive groves and give them to his own servants. He will take a tenth of your harvest and distribute it among his officers and attendants. He will want your male and female slaves and demand the finest of your cattle and donkeys for his own use. He will demand a tenth of your flocks and you will be his slaves. When that day comes, you will beg for relief from this king you are demanding, but the Lord will not help you."

But the people refused to listen to Samuel's warning. "Even so, we still want a king," they said. "We want to be like the nations around us. Our king will govern us and lead us into battle."

So Samuel told the Lord what the people had said, and the Lord replied, "Do as they say, and give them a king." Then Samuel agreed and sent the people home. (1 Sam. 8: 7-21)

And sure enough, God was right. Before long, widespread slavery returned to Israel. Voluntary contributions had been more than enough for the building of the Tabernacle, but Solomon's construction of the Temple depended on forced labor and collaboration with the foreign state of Tyre. Forced labor also built his palace—which was much larger than the temple and took twice as long to complete—and also served as a permanent labor force. (1 Kings 5-7, 9:15-23)

The Israelites were exempted from outright slavery, but their lives were hardly easy as they were forced to support the rapidly growing wealth of their ruler. And then things got difficult. When Solomon's son Rehoboam ascended to the throne, the assembly took the opportunity to ask for reform:

"Your father was a hard master," they said. "Lighten the harsh labor demands and heavy taxes that your father imposed on us. Then we will be your loyal subjects."

Rehoboam replied, "Give me three days to think this over. Then come back for my answer." So the people went away...

But Rehoboam spoke harshly to them, for he rejected the advice of the older counselors and followed the counsel of his younger advisors. He told the people, "My father was harsh on you, but I'll be even harsher! My father used whips on you, but I'll use scorpions! So the king paid no attention to the people's demands. (1 Kings 12 4-15)

This triggered an uprising in which 10 of the 12 tribes revolted, putting an end to a unified and independent Israel. God's position is made clear to those who sought to maintain a single kingdom. "This is what the Lord says: Do not fight against your relatives. Go back home, for what has happened is my doing!" (2 Chron. 11:4)

And that was the end of a united and independent Israel.

The division, corruption and infighting continued in both kingdoms—and sometimes between them—until Jerusalem was finally destroyed by the Babylonians, putting an end to the Israelite crown. The era of kings was marked by a long slow downhill slide into a quagmire of immorality which reads more like a romance novel than a holy book. Even King David, one of the first and greatest, committed a serious abuse of power: He had sex with Bathsheba, a married woman. After discovering that she was pregnant, he arranged the death of her husband so he could marry her. And later his son Absalom raped his half sister, killed his brother, and led a rebellion.

There were good kings, just as there were bad judges. But it seems that the rule of kings was generally marked by divisiveness, oppression and violence. There were lulls in the action, but nothing like the decades of peace and quiet that often happened under the leadership of judges.

Another distinction was that during the time of kings there was some separation of powers, with a distinct priestly class who maintained the spiritual order. The first king, Saul, overstepped this boundary, and as a consequence lost his divine mandate.

After the priest did not show up to offer a burnt sacrifice, Saul did it himself. The priest's response is clear: "How foolish!" Samuel exclaimed. "You have disobeyed the command of the Lord your God. Had you obeyed, the Lord would have established your kingdom over Israel forever. But now your dynasty must end, for the Lord has sought out a man after his own heart." (1 Sam. 13:13-14)

The priests also crossed the line at times, including one case in which a priest let a successful revolt (2 Kings 11:4-12). But mostly, the rule of kings was marked by a general neglect of God's law, in spite of directions to write by hand a personal copy and read it every day. "This regular reading will prevent him from becoming proud and acting as if he is above his fellow citizens. It will also prevent him from turning away from these commands in the smallest way. This will ensure that he and his descendents will reign for many generations in Israel. (Deut. 17:20)

This practice fell by the wayside, with the predicted results. The neglect became so severe that it was forgotten that the law was even written down somewhere. Then, in an inventory of the money collected at the temple gate (which revealed something of the king's priorities), it was rediscovered by accident. It is not clear how long it had been lost, but it is noted that this took place in the eighteenth year of the king's reign. (2 Kings 22:1-13) The king instituted reforms in an attempt to restore the right way of doing things, but all of the kings following him were described as evil or corrupt, and within a few generations Babylon took over and Jerusalem was utterly destroyed.

Ending the Exile

Being driven from one's home is difficult under any circumstances. But for the Israelites, there was an added affront; God had specifically promised them the land from which they were exiled. God's city lay in ruin for generations as Israel was exiled to Babylon. Something had clearly gone seriously wrong.

The book of Nehemiah begins with an account of the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem after it had been sacked by the Babylonians. More than a century after the city's destruction, the walls and gates were still in ruins. The temple had been rebuilt, but it was without protection. There was nothing to ensure the safety and independence of the people who valued that temple. The restoration of those walls would be among the most important events in the Old Testament.

Upon hearing the news that the recovery had stalled, Nehemiah is commissioned by God to rebuild the wall. Nehemiah goes to Jerusalem and carries out a grassroots effort. With God's guidance, he does an end run around the religious and political leaders who have failed to provide the necessary leadership, only bringing them in after he had already figured out what needed to happen. It would have been much simpler for God to give this task to someone who was already in a position of authority, but God chose someone of common birth who was still in exile. Fortunately, the leaders saw the merit of this approach, and work quickly got underway. (Neh. 2:16-18)

Nehemiah organized people to each take care of the section of wall closest to them. This harmonizes with a basic principle of participatory democracy, that decisions should be made by those who are most impacted by them.

This is done in spite of the opposition of the occupation rulers. The people engaged in a collective defense strategy in which people took turns working and standing guard, while always remaining armed in case of attack. Defense had a centralized coordination, but in the end, it was up to everyone. There were no soldiers keeping watch as the people toiled. This is another example of how leadership is possible without the usual trappings of a ruler's power.

This major undertaking was highly disruptive to the local economy, driving many into destitution. And so Nehemiah called a public meeting to hold the wealthy accountable and press for comprehensive debt relief. He recounted:

At the meeting I said to them, "The rest of us are doing all we can to redeem our Jewish relatives who have had to sell themselves to pagan foreigners, but you are selling them back into slavery again. How often must we redeem them?" And they had nothing to say in their defense."

Then I pressed further, "What you are doing is not right!...Repay the interest you charged on their money, grain, wine and olive oil."

Then they replied, “We will give back everything and demand nothing of the people. We will do as you say” (Neh. 5:8-12)

Nehemiah also declined the governor’s allotment, in order to lessen the burden on the people. Instead, he provided the substantial hospitality needed for his position as governor out of his own resources: “I asked for nothing, even though I regularly fed 150 Jewish officials at my table... Yet I refused to claim the governor’s food allowance because the people were already having a difficult time.” (Neh. 5:17-18)

One important lesson from Nehemiah is the importance of servant leadership. The Israelite king was forced to make a pact with the Babylonians, and was therefore unable to lead the effort to rebuild Jerusalem’s defenses. So it was left to grassroots efforts organized by a single divinely-inspired person, acting as first among equals. This was truly a collective effort, which took only two months to finish a job which had taken more than a century to begin.

Prophecies

Biblical prophecies are full of instructions to act justly and avoid oppression. These are too numerous to properly address here, but two are of particular interest.

In one, which takes place after the fall of Jerusalem, Ezekiel describes at length the rules to which princes should be subjected. It begins by setting aside a clear area for the princes, limiting what princes may ask of the people, and demanding that princes contribute to ritual sacrifices. (Ezekiel 45:7-25) Not only does this subject the prince to the rule of God’s law, but there is no mention of a king, which may indicate that the highest political rank should be saved for God. Israel had already made the mistake of human kingship.

The second describes an event in which God took the unusual step of asking for help. Michaiah prophesied a vision in which God asked the spirits:

“Who can entice King Ahab of Israel to go into battle against Ramoth-gilead so that he can be killed there?” There were many suggestions, until finally a spirit approached the Lord and said “I can do it!”

“How will you do this?” the Lord asked.

And the spirit replied, “I will go out and inspire all of Ahab’s prophets to speak lies.”

“You will succeed,” said the Lord. “Go ahead and do it.” (2 Chron. 18:19-21)

God could have simply wiped Ahab off the face of the earth. But instead, God took a collaborative approach. And if collaboration is good enough for God, it is probably good enough for us.

Part II: Post-Biblical organizing among Christians

There are many examples of organizing which carries on in the same direction as what is found in Acts, and while these took place in various ways throughout the past two millennia, I will focus on three periods of organizing which have relevance to today. Two of these are foundational and one is current: the desert-based monastic movement which began in the third century, during the time that Christianity was becoming a single established religion; the utopian religious communities that proliferated in early US history; and modern faith-based cooperatives which may be the beginnings of a new wave of activity.

For the first three centuries, Christianity was a decentralized cluster of phenomena, as many believers attempted to make sense of what had happened. Even the New Testament, which was written in the mid-first century, already refers to seven churches, and this process of reproduction continued as the movement spread.

Followers of the Way, as it was called, were subject to persecution, which was often severe and systematic. As a result of the persecution, strong systems to hold it all together did not develop. And so the practices followed by people who followed Jesus took on a wide variety of forms.

In 313 AD, the Roman Emperor Constantine I issued the Edict of Milan, which established religious neutrality for the empire and ended persecution of Christians. He later declared himself a Christian and was generally supportive of the faith. In 325, Constantine brought together the first comprehensive gathering of bishops, called the Council of Nicea, in an effort to bring together diverging practices and beliefs into a single coherent religion. This was the first general assembly of the church since the Council of Jerusalem described in Acts.

A major reason behind this move was that each of the many churches was developing its own practices and doctrines, with each of the Gospels holding sway in various regions. Of greater concern were the many forms which are now widely held to be heresies, the best known of which was Gnosticism. Christianity was losing its coherence, and despite Biblical passages which support decentralization and autonomy, something needed to be done to create a common base. The faith was in danger of falling apart without some sort of discernment of what was and was not included. In order to maintain Christianity as a single religion, some branches had to be trimmed and others lopped off.

This effort to harmonize the various traditions that all drew their inspiration from Jesus resulted in the Nicene Creed. The content of the creed is doctrinal in nature; it established an understanding of the nature of God, Jesus and the events surrounding the end of Jesus' life. The creed did not directly address the question of how to organize. However, Constantine presided over the event, and the presence of a single dogma backed up by the power of the emperor had a dramatic effect. Christianity now had a center of gravity around which to grow.

Solitude and Communion

Even before the Council of Nicea, a movement known as the Desert Fathers had developed. This was marked by individuals (usually men, but not always) moving out into the desert. They congregated in Egypt and elsewhere, on the outskirts of populated areas. Here they would be safe from persecution while still having some contact with civilization. Their practices, both spiritual and otherwise, were generally quite individualistic and often unique. They would often begin their respective sojourns by visiting someone who had already been established for a while, and after a period of discipleship, head out on their own.

This path was inspired by the solitary retreats of Jesus, Moses, John the Baptist and others, as well as being driven by the chaos and persecution of the day. And so it would seem to be an unusual place to find community. Some of these hermits lived alone, but others functioned in loose-knit communities, which became more organized as time went on, even setting up compounds with dormitories. Although they sought solitude and simplicity, they welcomed visitors and many of these hermits also worked to raise money for the poor, and donated portions of their modest crops.

This movement continued long after Christianity became established as a favored religion of the empire, and from some perspectives, the transformation from a spiritual uprising to a state religion was not a positive development. Indeed, Father Basil Pennington wrote, in his introduction to *Desert Fathers*:

The Roman Empire was splitting in two as barbarian hordes threatened it on every side, though which threatened Christian life more—the new respectability or the barbarian—it would be hard to say. The Founder’s dictum “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and unto God the things that are God’s” was more and more difficult to follow as taxes soared, ever-increasing military service was demanded, and a worldly Christianity began to flourish at the court and elsewhere in the Empire. (Waddell, xiii-xiv)

This loose network provided a foundation for the more highly-organized monastic orders that were to follow. The Desert Fathers also kept alive a more radical and all-encompassing practice of a faith that was experiencing its first bout of co-optation by the worldly powers. This desert sensibility has continued to appear throughout history, and is making a resurgence today, as described below.

The new Promised Land

The New World provided Europeans with a wealth of opportunity for experiment. Here was a land that was free of the religious establishment which weighted down life in the old country. This was most noticeable in the political developments which gave birth to the United States. But there were also grassroots developments in the form of faith-based communal societies.

These communities had names like Harmony, Jerusalem, Orderville and even Utopia. They came out of a variety of spiritual practices including the Shakers and Rappites, and generally shared a

drive to create an ideal new society out of raw land, in which they would live out their Biblical beliefs. These communities predated the colonies' independence, although it was not until the nineteenth century that the movement reached its peak. It was a substantial peak, with more than 100,000 members living in over a hundred communities at some point during that century.

One such community within this movement lives on as Iowa's Amana Colonies, which are a major tourist attraction still held by a community-owned corporation. After the Great Depression, the Amana Colonies gave up their communal structure, and began to encourage private enterprises. They also continued with more cooperative businesses, of which Amana Refrigeration was the most famous.

Groups such as the Amish and Mennonites have continued cooperative practices to the present day. One new cooperative, Green Field Farms, is now engaged in a major partnership with the secular cooperative that makes Organic Valley products, which is allowing them to market their products at much better prices, while still allowing their Amish and Conservative Mennonite members to maintain their cultural and religious integrity. (Organic Valley)

Modern cooperatives

The Church of the Sojourners is more a community than it is anything that fits most people's idea of a church. They are 35 people sharing four large houses in the Mission District of San Francisco. Each household functions as a family within their larger family. It is certainly a congregation, but the level of commitment to each other and to God is far beyond that found among any group of people who each go to church together on the Sundays when it is convenient. The Sojourners don't go to church. They live at church.

This is not to say that they don't do the things that are ordinarily brought to mind with the word "church." They do have a "gathered worship" service on Sunday evenings, crammed into their largest living room. But even here, they distinguish themselves with the extraordinary step of incorporating a shared dinner into the service.

The Sojourners are committed to each other, sharing resources with each other, and providing hospitality to others. While they are not a pure commune—each member has his or her own possessions and spending money—they do share cars and any income earned above a certain level.

Within this group is an inner circle of "covenanted members," who are those most committed to the community, and who collectively provide its leadership. The depths of this commitment rival that of marriage, as each member's name is carved into the wooden communion cup. Members are free to go, and are encouraged to have personal savings that could be used in the event of a departure. But most stick around.

The Sojourners have been joined by a new effort to build Christian community, and are now finding that they are a storehouse of wisdom and experience for a wave of new communities that

identify as the New Monastics. In spite of the name, these communities look much like any modern group household. They are just regular folks who seek to live by the example of Christ. This movement sees community as a means of experiencing conversion as a lifelong experience, and that personal unfolding is mirrored in how the movement sees itself—as a decentralized effort to live by the example of Jesus. They are heavily influenced by the Benedictine order, but by other currents as well.

A loose identity is formed around a dozen “marks.” These are principles that are generally agreed to be indicative of their collective efforts, rather than a monastic rule in the traditional sense. These marks are distinctly countercultural, beginning with “Relocation to the abandoned places of Empire” (such as North Philadelphia and Durham, North Carolina) in order to connect with the desert experience of the early Christian hermits. They also include sharing of economic resources and “conflict resolution within communities along the lines of Matthew 18.” (New Monasticism Project)

Fred Bahnson writes in *School(s) for Conversion* that his church in North Carolina takes to heart Jesus’ guidelines in this passage to first try to work out a conflict before bringing it to the church. Rather than seeking punishment for misdeeds, they attempt to reconcile with wayward members. He notes that “Jesus chose to eat with Gentiles and tax collectors, even though they were reviled, which complicates any attempt to simply kick out the offender (Rutba House, p.156)

I had the privilege of attending the Church of the Sojourners’ recent “School for Conversion,” which it hosted with the New Monasticism Project. At this event, the atmosphere was one of general exploration, and openness to others’ states of faith. This openness was reflected in the diversity among the Sojourners (as well as the attendees and the New Monastic movement in general): In addition to a large number of evangelicals and Mennonites, there were Catholics and Anglicans and mainline Protestants. Here were people that supposedly can’t make it through a Sunday morning together, living together in intense round-the-clock fellowship in a community that has lasted for more than two decades. Doctrinal issues do come up, but the focus is kept on the practice of living together and loving each other.

One of the movement’s scribes, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, contrasts the depth of faith that community can build with the superficial and sometimes temporary changes that often result from the more familiar form of conversion found in the altar call. “Unfortunately, we who have learned to profess Christianity in this way appear no more like Christ in actual practice than anyone else in America...Americans are in desperate need of new spaces where the personal experience of a relationship with Jesus is not privatized but rather made public and active in the life of the community.” (Stock)

The New Monastics are just beginning to solidify as a movement, but there are others in whose footsteps they follow. Further down this path is Jesus People USA, which was started in 1972. This community is made up of 500 residents living in a single apartment building in Chicago, with a larger non-resident congregation. They grew out of the Jesus People—which was either the

Christian part of the hippy movement or the hippy part of the Christian movement, depending on one's perspective—and are currently affiliated with the Evangelical Covenant Church.

The community also owns several enterprises, including t-shirt printing, roofing supplies and sheet metal work. Together, these projects provide 90% of the community's income. They are seen as an integral part of the community's ministry, in which they can interact with the public while serving as a role model that is directly inspired by Acts.

The community is very aware of the pitfalls of power, and to avoid those, they have decentralized the power of the organization. They do give authority to some, but it is tempered by a desire to share power. Their explanation of this delves into key Biblical issues of leadership and divine guidance:

The role of leadership in a community is not without difficulty. By nature, it is our inclination to desire such a role for all the wrong reasons; for honor, for prestige, for the adoration of others, or simply to prove that we are someone. In recognition of these natural tendencies that occur in all of us, we don't operate on a one-leader basis. At this point we have a council of eight pastors in leadership. Directly under the council are deacons, deaconesses, and group leaders. While the primary oversight of the ministry is done by the council of elders, much of the responsibilities for the daily running of the community and our businesses are taken by various other individuals. Such plurality in leadership is based on a mutual submission which can hear God's voice through the youngest community member as well as those who hold authority positions. Every healthy community has good leadership with mutual submission simply as a by-product of Christian commitment one to another. (Jesus People USA)

Not all cooperative projects require a believer to move in with the church, however. Another innovative project is the Community Food Cooperative of Utah, which delivers staple grocery items at up to 50 percent below the retail cost, delivered once a month to locations that include churches of many denominations throughout the greater Salt Lake City area. They describe their goals as reducing hunger and building community for members of all religions. (Community Food Co-op of Utah)

Throughout the US and beyond, there are a variety of cooperatives which are shaped out of Christian values. These include a range of intentional communities, credit unions, workplaces and schools, as well as at least two cooperatives which are set up to share medical expenses among their members. More information on these cooperative ministries is available at www.bookofacts.info.

Part III: A way forward through shared values

There are significant value differences within American culture today, and these cannot be ignored. However, there are also matters of agreement, and one area in which agreement can be nurtured is

that we generally don't want to force our views on other people. Certainly it is human nature to want others to see things our way, but persuasion and force are entirely different things. We do not want the responsibility or conflict that goes along with imposing behavior based on our values on people who don't share them. Part of American culture is the sentiment of live and let live, and free will is a major part of Christian doctrine.

Unfortunately most people do not see another way of being. Positive models are needed to get people inspired and hopeful about overcoming our divisions without having one side eventually win the battle and force its will on the other. So what would it look like to set up parallel systems based on different values? Could this work, or is it a naïve dream?

In fact, it is already happening. In northern Spain, the Basque people have created Mondragon, a worker-owned economic system with 80,000 employees, which has in many ways rendered the government irrelevant; and in Italy, a Catholic cooperative federation has 300,000 employees and three million members.

While large-scale cooperative federations can be found throughout the world, one of the best-known examples of a cooperative system is found in the Mondragon Cooperative Corporation, in the Basque country. They got their start in the aftermath of the Spanish Civil War. Led by a Catholic Priest named Jose Maria Arizmendiarieta, several graduates of the local parish school went on to get engineering degrees at the school Father Jose started. Upon graduation, they had no job local job opportunities and so they started the Fagor cooperative in 1956, manufacturing appliances for a domestic market that was isolated under the Franco regime. In spite of being an oppressed minority struggling under a fascist dictatorship, they grew quickly. The main reason for this is that they invested all profits into creating more cooperatives, in order to create more jobs for their community. Individual workers retained a capital account that they were able to cash out when they retired, but before that time, the money was available for investment in new cooperatives.

Today, Fagor and its descendents—160 firms in all— would not be recognized by those pioneers. Its sales reached \$16 billion in 2005. Its parent corporation, worth more than \$31 billion, is one of the largest in Spain, and includes Spain's fifth-largest bank and second-largest grocery business, research and development organizations, cooperative support systems, a social security system, schools from childhood to the university and technical institute levels, and its own hospital and health insurance systems. The business failure rate is at an unbelievable level: Of 103 firms created in the first three decades, only three closed, in spite of a severe decade-long recession that gripped Spain for much of that time. Whenever a job is eliminated, the workers are retrained and offered employment elsewhere in the system. The Basque country lost more than 100,000 jobs during the recession, but the cooperatives were still adding jobs.

This cooperative complex has effectively taken over many of the functions usually considered to be the realm of government. And it has done this on a voluntary basis; people are free to live in the area without joining the cooperative, and many do. But the important thing is that they have the option to join a democratic, locally controlled organization that will take care of them from cradle to

grave.

While the plight of the Basque people has also provoked a stubborn insurrection, Mondragon has stepped outside the usual struggle for political independence. Instead, they have opted for the peaceful path toward economic independence. They have created a new economic system within the free market, which serves many of government's common functions, but which controls no territory. No one has ever been annexed, no land or property has been collectivized; it has grown as people have freely chosen to join it.

Another glimpse of a possible future can be seen in Italy, which is home to several major cooperative federations. These have each grown out of the shared desire of like-minded people, whether secular-socialist or Catholic. Each tends to be strongest in certain regions, but none have a concrete, exclusive territory. Each is tied to a different political party.

The Confederazione Cooperativa Italiane Cooperative is one of these federations. It has 3 million members and is more than a century old. It includes nearly 20,000 businesses employing 390,000 workers throughout all sectors of the Italian economy. They account for 11 percent of the Italian banking industry, and have particular strength in the housing, agricultural, and social services industries. (Confcooperative). It is much larger than Mondragon, although it does not serve as a comprehensive social system in the way of its Basque cousin.

Holding these two examples side by side, we can see the beginnings of the potential. Mondragon shows us the extent to which cooperatives can transform an economy, helping people to use Christian values of sharing and justice to strengthen their community in challenging times. And Confederazione Cooperativa shows that this need not be exclusive. The beauty of the cooperative model is its voluntary nature, which allows people who do not agree on all the details of life to coexist without having to support the practices which they believe are wrong.

Part IV: Conditions for a cooperative revival

There are many ways in which collaboration will not be possible. After all, the story of Israel is the story of a theocracy. In this framework, questions of government ultimately boil down to figuring out the best way to discern God's will, which is then not subject to debate. This is clearly in contrast with widely-held views about the separation of church and state and secular democracy. But when we look at how Israel continued to exist with or without strong leadership, with or without strong rulers, and throughout various conquests and exiles, it appears that a worldly theocracy tied to control of a certain territory is counterproductive.

However, great many people on both sides have very strongly held beliefs that do not allow for this. On the subject of sexual morality, for example, there are serious and insurmountable differences of opinion about what is right and wrong. Whatever you believe, someone will probably do or advocate something that you find immoral, offensive, or wrong.

But that happens under our current system, which undermines the argument for the status quo. We don't have to condone injustices (however we define them), but we must acknowledge that the costs of forcing people to act as though they share our ethics may outweigh the benefits—and it is also unbiblical. We are learning what comes when two sides with irreconcilable differences struggle for control of a single government system; it results in stalemate.

An April 2007 editorial by Christianity Today concluded that there is no Evangelical consensus, and celebrated the diversity found even within this segment of Christianity.

This diversity—even if it risks misunderstanding in the media—is something we should celebrate. That a wide spectrum of evangelicals feel called to engage in social justice is good for evangelicalism, the nation, and the world. But determining priorities and strategies is a matter of prudential judgment, and anyone who thinks they have the very mind of God on any matter should take heed.

Evangelicals from the Left, Right, and center are wise to heed Paul's words: "If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be?" (1 Cor. 12:17).

So let's stop questioning each other's evangelical credentials and just do the work we believe God has called us to. (Christianity Today)

This perspective recognizes that nobody on earth is currently recognized by all as having a direct line to God. So creating a system in which people of good faith can each set up systems based on the beliefs that they do share is as important to the task of helping Christians get along with other Christians as it is to building bridges to the rest of the population.

The ecumenical membership of the New Monasticism movement is an encouraging sign that people can set aside their theological differences in pursuit of the higher good of creating Christian community. But there will likely be those who focus on the differences, and do not wish to fraternize with those they regard as apostates. They are free to organize cooperatively among themselves, however restricted their definition.

In this proposed environment, we would have a plurality of cooperative systems, linked to each other to the extent that they feel comfortable. These systems would be competitors for participants and other resources, and would probably come into conflict from time to time. However, once it is established that none is trying to force itself upon the others, there would be an improved chance for dialogue and positive exchange.

This competition might serve as a showcase for evangelism. Rather than telling the world how much better they are, these various systems would have an opportunity and an obligation to put their beliefs into practice in a way that would make obvious to the world who is most closely approaching God's will. Those which are could be expected to be blessed by internal harmony and stability, low rates of departure, and general prosperity. Instead of waiting for the Kingdom of Heaven (which has so far failed to bring about much visible progress), the race would be on to

tangibly build it.

Obstacles

I have so far focused on Christian values. However, when considering the possibility for Christian cooperation, we must also look at the standards of the existing cooperative movement, which has as its hallmark principles seven standards which are internationally recognized. Three of these present issues which must be addressed.

First and foremost, cooperative systems which are based on a specific religious identity would be in conflict with the first of these principles. The *Statement on the Cooperative Identity* holds that “Co-operatives are voluntary organisations, open to all persons able to use their services and willing to accept the responsibilities of membership, without gender, social, racial, political or *religious discrimination*.” (International Cooperative Alliance, emphasis added)

This is a serious issue which may prevent serious bridge building. In the end, Christians may create something *like* cooperatives, as part of their own movement that draws from the established cooperative movement where appropriate, without being a part of that movement.

However, this might also be an opportunity for dialogue about when whether religion might sometimes be a valid membership criterion for a cooperative. For example, if the point of a living arrangement is to help each other build discipleship as Christians, then shared faith is an integral part of membership.

Another example of how this might play out is found in the healthcare cooperative Medi-Share, which helps members pay for other Christians’ medical expenses. Their website states that “At Medi-Share, members are challenged to live their lives according to simple, biblical principles of health and wellness. By doing so, we strive to ensure that your share amounts aren't going to fund unbiblical, unhealthy (and expensive) lifestyles, thus reducing the amount members are required to share.” (Medi-Share)

Drug abuse, promiscuity, and other unbiblical practices do tend to result in higher healthcare costs, so in this light their exclusion is a legitimate requirement for membership in a healthcare cooperative. Of course, we must distinguish between the requirement to follow Biblical teachings and the requirement to believe in them. After all, some non-Christians live lives that are marked by good Christian behavior. And of course, not all Christians hold to their values at all times.

Another issue to be resolved will be that of the second Cooperative Principle, democracy. While the Bible does clearly encourage power be spread among the people, it is not clear that this is to occur on the cooperative model of one member, one vote. Many denominations place a high emphasis on the family, and may be expected to attach membership to the family rather than the individual. In more conservative circles, this may result in the disenfranchisement of women.

There are many passages in the Bible in which the majority of people are horribly wrong, and none of the truly great Biblical leaders were elected. Many Christians have a strong tendency toward deference to clergy. Even though this does not have scriptural support with regards to economic questions, it should be noted that the first directors of the cooperative project in Acts were specifically selected because they were “well respected and full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom.” (Acts 6:3)

It should also be noted that while there are numerous Biblical references to decisions being made by the people, these do not clearly state that the people decided using what we would recognize as a democratic process. Acts does point toward a new way of doing things, but it is not clear that this new way is similar to modern cooperatives.

Some decisions, such as how to include the Gentiles, seem to indicate democratic and egalitarian tendencies, even in the course of setting doctrine. It is important to distinguish between economic and spiritual decisions, since this paper is only addressing the former. However, the Council of Jerusalem made its decision on circumcision unanimously, (Acts 15:25) which suggests that some form of consensus was the standard for economic decisions as well. But in the absence of any minutes taken for the economic decisions, we have little to guide us, so the exact nature of the process is a matter of speculation.

A third issue is the fourth Cooperative Principle of autonomy. Many churches own significant property holdings, and even commercial enterprises. And as seen with Jesus People USA, there is no clear division between workplace and ministry. The enterprises generate the resources needed to sustain the community, which is not distinct from the church. So it may not always be possible to establish where the church ends and the cooperative begins.

The most dramatic example of this is the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. This faith is generally held to be distinct from Christianity, but it shares its foundations and provides the US’s largest examples of faith-based, community owned enterprises, so it is a useful model. One of these enterprises was Zion’s Co-operative Mercantile Institution (ZCMI), which had more than a dozen locations and is a household name throughout Utah and beyond. It has since been sold, but for more than a century it was a community-owned store. However, the church owned a controlling share, so it was never a true cooperative.

In cases where churches have commercial interests, they may not welcome competition from more independent or interdenominational Christian businesses. There may also be competition for financing as some members may view funding these new cooperative projects as legitimate channels for their tithing. It may well be that today’s Christian leaders, being accustomed to economic power and the perks that it brings, will not be as willing to give that up as were the Apostles, to whom economic administration was seen as a bothersome distraction from their true work.

Conclusion

For whatever reason, the bold experiment described in the book of Acts did not continue. One response to all this is that this method has been tried and hasn't worked. And it is true that the initial attempt at Christian communalism was not a long-term success. However, I would argue that this is because of specific conditions that do not need to apply today.

First, the change was too abrupt; the participants did not have a chance to adjust to the freedom and responsibility that comes with a democratic economy which is based on voluntary sharing. Add in the rapid growth, language difficulties (except for on Pentecost) and persecution, and you have very poor conditions for developing a new economic system.

Another complication in the execution of Acts is that there was no obvious means for generating wealth. It seems that the major source of income was newcomers who donated their belongings, but presumably the act of leaving their old lives behind included leaving their livelihoods. Some believers did take time to work and make money to support themselves, but again, this was individual income to be shared (or not). Paul seems to describe a breakdown in the common wealth when he writes "We never accepted food from anyone without paying for it. We worked hard day and night so we would not be a burden to any of you." (2 Thessalonians 3:8) The Bible doesn't include a description of any sort of common industry, which might have made for a more sustainable situation.

It may be that human nature is incompatible with this pure ideal and that such a society cannot exist in this world. But we do not know this to be true. And just because a path does not lead all the way to the final goal, it does not mean that movement down that path is impossible or undesirable. If we can move toward an ideal, we should. The failure to create heaven on earth with their first try does not provide any reason why the vision of the first Christians is any less wonderful. A cooperatively-structured world without poverty or need is, at the very least, a really nice idea that will be very difficult to attain. It might also be a miracle.

And perhaps more importantly, cooperatives provide a way to remove competition as the primary motivator for commerce without throwing out the existing economic order. This transition is highly important; sudden lurches toward sharing of wealth have consistently shown themselves to be less sustainable than gradual shifts. And the great and growing divide between the poor and wealthy that is now found in Russia and China is a clear illustration of this.

Coercive morality has proven itself to be exhausting and draining. We can see that in many cases, the cost of forcing others to behave according to our values outweighs the benefits. So let us shift our focus from the content of the decision, to the process by which it is made. And let us celebrate when they are made in a positive and collaborative way, more democratically than before.

It is up to us to decide whether we live in a hell of competition, or a heaven of cooperation. Cooperatives, as they are presently understood, do not entirely capture the teachings of Jesus, but they are a step in that direction. They provide a foundation upon which higher forms may be built,

and create a balance between the conflicting needs to respect free will and maintain social integrity among believers.

Cooperatives provide the best of both worlds. We do not have to suffer through the disruption of having our government and economy overthrown, but we can start to build a new system that actually serves our needs. We can build cooperative networks with people who share our basic beliefs, while people with other beliefs are allowed to build their own networks nearby. We will certainly disagree about the best way to do things, but that is simply a fact of life.

Even if this does not bring about a supernatural transformation, the benefits of a cooperative economy should be clear to all. They should be especially clear to Christians, who are implored avoid the sin of greed and to love their neighbor, but then sent out into a competitive world in which they are expected to gain at their neighbor's expense. By creating cooperative systems based on Christian values, it will be possible to lessen the disconnection between Sunday morning and Monday morning. This will result in a more integrated practice, a more coherent community, and a stronger support for Christian values. In short, it will make it easier to be good.

This paper can only serve as the beginning of the discussion. Cooperatives by their very nature are dependent on the visions and views of their members, so it is impossible to predict what form or direction they will take. There are significant concerns to be addressed on both sides, and in a time of growing turmoil and dwindling resources, it is uncertain at best that these concerns will be able to be addressed in a productive way.

However, it seems that cooperation is more likely to work than the antagonistic stalemate which has plagued US politics in recent years. Cooperatives provide an opportunity to try something different. It might not work out, but we have little choice but to try, and enough evidence that it can work to give cause for hope. It will be a long walk to the Promised Land, but creating cooperatives provides a first step.

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