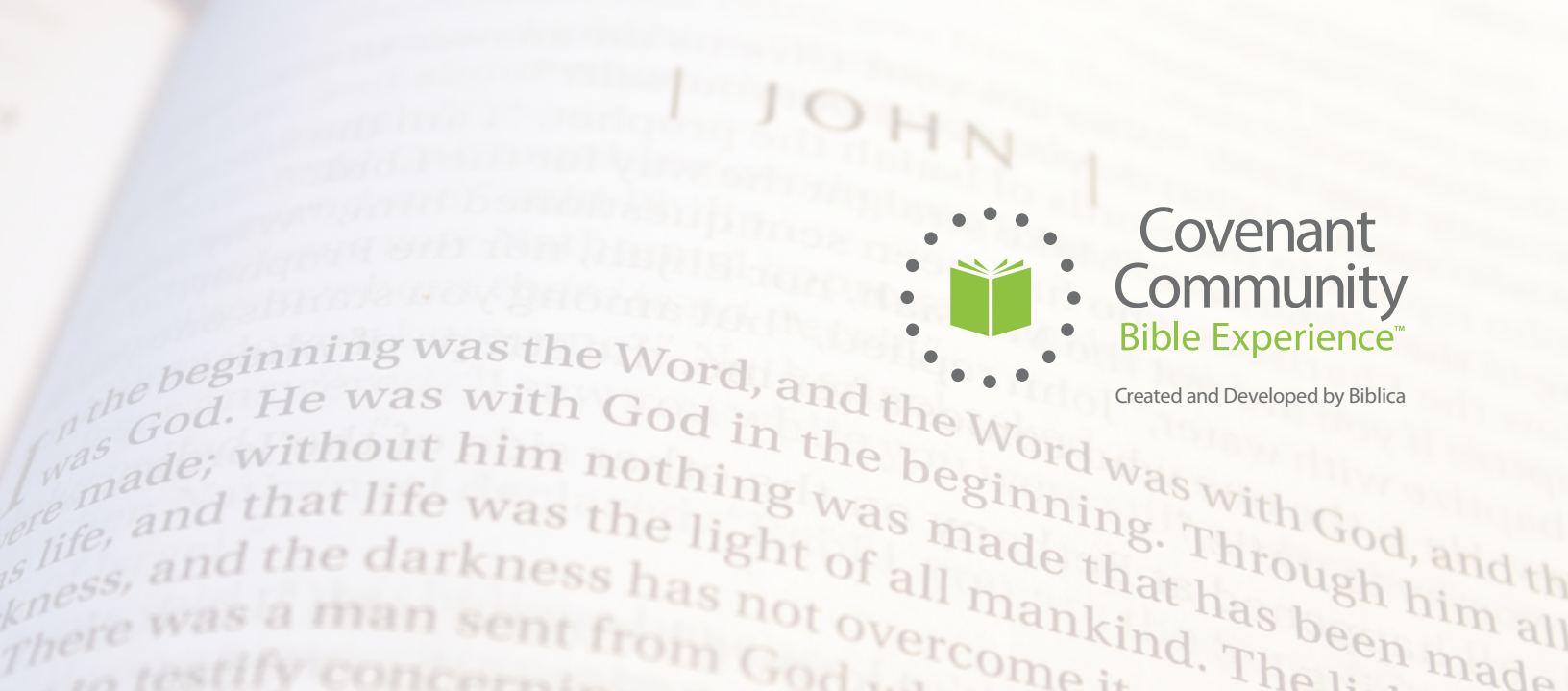




Covenant
Community
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Covenanters Reading Scripture Through History

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We are not the first Christians to read Scripture. This may seem obvious enough, but it is a reality worth considering. When we come to the pages of Scripture, we take our place in a long line of believers that spans millennia, linking generation after generation of Christians to the beginning of the church. As we read together over the next forty days, we will learn from those in our present community. We can also learn from those who have been Christian and Covenant before we have. *What* has it meant to read Scripture within the Covenant? *How* has Scripture been read? *Why* has it been read?

This supplemental historical material invites us to enlarge the community in which we experience the Bible. We draw from the history of the Covenant (1885–present), as well as its roots within Pietism and the Protestant Reformation Pietism sought to recover, to consider how and why Covenanters have read Scripture.

PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN:



The Evangelical Covenant Church
MAKE AND DEEPEN DISCIPLES



THE INTERNATIONAL BIBLE SOCIETY

What do we read?

We read Scripture. In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Sweden, citizens were required by law to attend Sunday service in the Lutheran parish church. There they would hear the day's lectionary text and sound biblical instruction from the priest. But some wanted more—especially the Mission Friends, those impacted by the Pietist revival rolling in from Germany. They wanted to meditate on the biblical texts throughout the week—at home and work, in their fields and factories, with their families and friends. The ideal practice was daily readings of Scripture, not just Sundays. Because of their serious study of the Bible and their eagerness for daily devotional reading, these Mission Friends were referred to as “readers,” often scornfully by their critics. Yet many wore this badge proudly—they delighted in reading, and they were studious in their voluntary “homework.” In this way God’s word permeated their whole lives, and its relevance was constantly made evident. The reading of Scripture could elevate even the most mundane parts of a weekday into as holy a moment as one might experience in the worship of Sunday morning. The regular reading of Scripture made the reader aware of God’s constant presence, and this made true transformation possible. —*Mark Safstrom*

We read Scripture as our only perfect rule for faith, doctrine, and conduct. Commitment to the centrality of Scripture is the defining feature of the Covenant Church. While various descriptions have been written to capture the “character” of the Covenant and various resolutions written as guides for collective moral discernment and action, the Covenant has only one confession: “This Covenant confesses God’s word, the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament, as the only perfect rule for faith, doctrine, and conduct.” This is the entirety of the Covenant’s confession, quoted from the minutes of the 1885 organizational meeting. It could equally be quoted from our current constitution, where it remains unchanged.

Prior to officially organizing the Covenant, those gathered discussed first whether Scripture justifies organization at all. To quote again from the organizational meeting minutes, they asked: “Is it right or wrong that Christian congregations and organizations join together in work for the kingdom of God, and on what basis can such a union occur?” They found support in the New Testament precedents of the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15), Paul’s description of the mutual generosity of congregations

(1 Corinthians 8), and his teachings on Christian unity (Ephesians 4:1–16; Romans 12:4–5). Similarly, every Covenant resolution begins with a section outlining the biblical basis or biblical understanding that informs the call to action that follows. This is not to proof-text but, like those who founded the Covenant in 1885, to seek to live under Scripture’s authority. Here P. P. Waldenström is often quoted (1872), “But here that is decisive which in all spiritual concerns and questions must be the principle thing: Where is it written?” —*Hauna Ondrey*

We confess Scripture and not a particular interpretation of Scripture.

The Covenant’s simple, single confession of Scripture as “the only perfect rule for faith, doctrine, and conduct,” is highly unique for what it doesn’t say. Waldenström’s “Where is it written?” sparked a controversy that rocked and divided the revival movements in both Sweden and America, and that played a critical role in the formation of the Covenant on both sides of the Atlantic. When Waldenström heard the standard claim that Jesus’s death reconciled a wrathful God to a sinful humanity, he countered with the question, “Where is that written?” This interpretation of the atonement was written in the Augsburg Confession—the standard of orthodoxy within the Swedish Lutheran State Church—but Waldenström could not find it in Scripture. This discrepancy underscored the possibility that confessional statements could actually obscure Scripture’s meaning by predisposing the reader to look for what the confession says is there. Waldenström’s conclusion regarding the atonement forced a choice between Scripture itself and a fixed—and ultimately human—interpretation of Scripture systematized in a confessional statement.

It was the desire to remain open to fresh readings, to correctives from Scripture itself, that prompted Mission Friends to adopt Scripture alone as its confession rather than any particular interpretation of Scripture. As David Nyvall explained, “Whatever a confession can say, Scripture can say it better.... Without being a confession, and just because of that fact, the New Testament excels all written confessions by the number of truths expressed and implied, by the absence of errors, and by the fact that whatever truth it has in common with any confession is more simply and more clearly expressed in the New Testament.” —*Hauna Ondrey*

How do we read Scripture?

We read Scripture with all believers. Speaking at a Covenant Congress in 1893, David Nyvall described the young church by saying, “Our first principle is that every true believer has a right to church membership with us in all respects, and it would be a mortal sin and treason to exclude someone that the Lord himself has received.” Speaking to Covenant pastors in 1910, C. V. Bowman, the third president of the Covenant, said, “The Mission Friends maintain that the local church shall consist of only believing members, but at the same time have room for all believers without regard to their particular interpretations of controversial doctrinal teachings. This is to say that the local church shall in a great measure be a faithful portrait of God’s church at large.”

The Covenant has committed to the authority of Scripture over any other authority in order to avoid division over points of doctrine that are open to several interpretations, so that a unified church “as big as the New Testament” may be preserved. Bowman contrasted the Covenant both with denominations that admit believers and unbelievers into membership and those for which specific doctrinal positions are prerequisite to membership. “In the former example, the door of the church is too wide so that even the world can come in. In the latter example, the door is too narrow so that some believers must remain outside.” The Covenant position of “only believers, all believers” was unique, and Bowman recognized this. “It is this principle which really distinguishes Mission Friends from other Christian denominations, and which justifies their existence as a particular church.” —*Hauna Ondrey*

We read humbly. Throughout the history of the Covenant, reading Scripture humbly has been seen to go hand in hand with the recognition that we see in part. This recognition strengthens Covenant commitment to not allow doctrinal divisions to trump unity. Those who established the Covenant Church in 1885 had witnessed faith communities torn apart by differences of opinion. Reflecting on these divisions, laypreacher C. J. Nyvall lamented, “Oh, how painful it is to hear Christian friends speak in that tone of infallibility. My opinion in the matter is that as the individual Christian has much of sin and shortcomings to confess, so have whole denominations if the true fear of God prevails. We would surely consider it too far amiss, providing any spiritual sobriety exists, if one brother should say to another: ‘I understand the word of God better than you’ or ‘I do not go as far astray as you,’ and so forth. But

are the contentions between the different church groups and the wretched clamor about the purity of one's own teaching and the errors in that of others any less absurd?" Mission Friends were resolved that the denomination they established would transcend these divisions.

Because we recognize that we read Scripture imperfectly, we read it humbly. While sufficient clarity exists on matters necessary for salvation, diverse interpretations exist—we see in a mirror, dimly. C. J. Nyvall's son David Nyvall understood diversity of interpretation as "an unavoidable result" of our finitude: "We have only one pledge over them all, namely, the New Testament. And in such cases as this or that doctrine is evidently held in a true Christian life and faith in Jesus unto salvation, their different interpretations are tolerated as an unavoidable result of the imperfections and want which according to the word of the apostle lets us see in part and prophesy in part."

As we seek to obey God's will as it is revealed to us in Scripture, we remain humble because we recognize that we could be wrong—that truth may lie outside us. For this reason, we read with open ears and eyes, we read and re-read, humbly open to God's revelation, as it comes through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in ourselves and in our brothers and sisters. —*Mark Safstrom and Hauna Ondrey*

We read Scripture in community. It is a great challenge to live up to the ideal that people from diverse backgrounds and opinions might be united in the common reading of Scripture without allowing disagreement to fracture the community. Reading together is a means to mitigate the harmful practices that can arise when well-meaning Christians unwittingly abuse Scripture by treating their own personal interpretation as the final word. It matters what we believe about what we read, yet it also matters how we read. By reading together, the members of the congregation can help complement each other's fragmented understandings of Scripture and the mysteries of faith. This was the sentiment expressed by another preacher, C. O. Rosenius, as he urged Pietists to strive for this lofty goal in the 1850s: "Now since we have a tendency to either lean to one side or the other, then it is quite healthy for us to keep company with brothers who have the opposite opinion from us. It is healthy to listen to both Paul and James, though it can cause us to be conflicted within ourselves. Besides, it is the duty and wisdom of every Christian, as far as it is possible, to seek to unify and keep

Why do we read Scripture?

together this band of siblings, which is so often tempted to break apart.” We need each other to balance our own limited readings of Scripture. This is especially true of minority voices, a point emphasized in the 1963 study on Christian Freedom and Biblical Interpretation: “Christian vitality has not always been maintained by the majority. It has, in fact, often been found only in small minorities.... Unless we wish to stifle all emergent spiritual vitality, we must be sure that people within our fellowship will be free to express themselves in ways which are different from the majority position without the fear of being labeled as disloyal.”

Reading together serves as a corrective, a balance, and, in the words of seminary professor and dean (1922–1954) Nils Lund, “guards us from making our experience or interpretation the ‘measuring rod for the whole church of God.’” —*Mark Safstrom and Hauna Ondrey*

We read Scripture to encounter God through the work of the Holy Spirit.

The sixteenth-century Protestant Reformers emphasized a dynamic view of Scripture. That is to say, Scripture is not primarily a static encyclopedia from which to draw dogma, but first and foremost the means by which we encounter God through the work of the Holy Spirit. Scripture is inspired because it is “an instrument of the Holy Spirit, not only for its origin, but for its continual usefulness” (David Nyvall). But following the initial generation of Reformers, emphasis was increasingly placed on ever-more-intricate doctrinal statements in order to distinguish specific Protestant confessions—to determine, for example, whether someone was a Lutheran rather than a Calvinist. Following devastating inter-confessional wars that marked the seventeenth century in Europe, Spener and other Pietists felt that this divisive and dry emphasis on doctrine distracted from Scripture’s primary purpose—even compromised it by using Scriptures as ammunition for theological disputation rather than as food for the spiritual life (Nils Lund). They sought to center a devotional reading of Scripture through which the reader encounters Christ, the living Word, through the work of the Holy Spirit—a devotional reading of Scripture through which the Spirit transforms the reader into the image of Christ, the living Word. This insight has been upheld throughout the history of the Covenant. As expressed in 1963, “To read [Scripture] properly... is to find it an altar where one meets the living God and receives personally the reality of redemption” (Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom, 1963). —*Hauna Ondrey*

We read Scripture to encounter Christ, the Living Word.

One of the primary reasons we read Scripture is to encounter Christ, the living Word. The Evangelical Covenant emerged as a group of faithful Christians who were committed to such an encounter. Pietists and the early evangelicals who followed them believed that all Christians have access to God. Access is enriched by a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, cultivated by devotional interaction with Christ through the word. Pietist theologians, such as August Hermann Francke and Philipp Jakob Spener, believed that reading Scripture plants a seed of life within the reader, which the Holy Spirit nurtures through ongoing reading and through faith acting in love (Galatians 5:6). When believers read Scripture, the Holy Spirit illumines their understanding and empowers their spiritual growth. The process of reading God's word is spiritual and relational and therefore formational and transformational. Believers are converted in the reading, shaping their lenses, opening their spirits, and softening their hearts in ever new ways. As Spener said in *Pia Desideria*, "The word of God remains the seed from which all that is good in us must grow. If we succeed in getting the people to seek eagerly and diligently in the book of life for their joy, their spiritual life will be wonderfully strengthened and they will become altogether different people." —*Michelle Clifton-Soderstrom*

We read Scripture to be transformed individually.

The Covenant Church's emphasis on the necessity of new birth builds on the Pietist tradition of valuing the reading of Scripture as an ongoing process of spiritual growth and maturity. Scripture confronts the reader with the claims of Jesus Christ on his or her life and carries that believer toward repentance, conversion, and sanctification. This emphasis can be seen in the words of the Pietist lay preacher, Maja Lisa Söderlund (1794–1851): "The one who comes to Jesus, comes to the perfect light and sees his sins much better, than if one were to see them in the less perfect light of the law. I wish to create a picture from this, which everyone will recognize. When you walk into a dark room, you see nothing of that which is in it. Then the daylight comes in, and you see all the objects in the room. But now the sun shines its light and fills up the room, and then you see these things in infinite detail. Moses casts his light, and you see many sins. John the Baptist shines his, and you see even more. But allow Jesus in—and then you will see how sin abounds. But you will also experience how he can clean a house."

For Söderlund and the Pietist tradition she represents, reading Scripture was a conversion—the means by which God’s light would burst into believers’ lives, expose their sinfulness, alert them to the need for Christ, and reveal what unfinished work remained. Christ offered a genuine hope that a believer’s life truly could be sanctified and made new. The Holy Spirit is the agent that is completing this task. Conversion was not a one-time experience but rather an ongoing process in which a believer turns and returns to God in daily reflection on Scripture. To learn to know this life-transforming Christ—not as an abstract concept but as a real, daily presence—requires regular immersion in Scripture. In Scripture we meet and learn to know him. —*Mark Safstrom*

We read Scripture to be transformed communally.

The original society of the Evangelical Covenant was called Mission Friends. The people of the movement treasured friendship and unity in Christ above any doctrinal statement. Friendship was not simply the mode through which the gospel was communicated; friendship was understood as the heart of the gospel (John 15:3). One way these friendships grew was through Bible studies, or groups of readers called conventicles. In spite of outside opposition, these conventicles continued gathering around the word and found new life in their relationships. New readers, including women and children, were allowed at the table. The practice of reading Scripture across standard social divisions led to transformation. It led to a communion of diverse genders, classes, and educational backgrounds, breaking down social barriers between dominant and marginalized groups. This transformed community in turn transformed their society as they read God’s word together. —*Michelle Clifton-Soderstrom*

We read Scripture to do God’s word, 1. Second Timothy 3:16, “All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness,” is one of those verses that many of us learn early in our Christian lives. It helps us understand why we seek to give these ancient writings authority over our lives today, why we Covenanters regard them as “the only perfect rule for faith, doctrine, and conduct.” But this verse is incomplete without the next, for Scripture is inspired and useful “so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work” (3:17). That’s something

that our Pietist ancestors understood well. August Hermann Francke (1663–1727), one of the most important leaders in the Pietist movement, made the German city of Halle a center of religious revival and social reform. He established a publishing house that printed affordable “people’s Bibles”—millions of them, up into the twentieth century. But the Halle Institutions also included a pharmacy, an orphanage, and schools for boys and girls, and under Francke’s leadership the University of Halle trained pastors, military chaplains, and the very first Protestant missionaries. As a Lutheran pastor, Francke knew that biblical faith leads to more than knowledge: it is “a living, busy, active, mighty thing . . . doing good works incessantly” (Martin Luther, “Preface to Romans”). —*Chris Gehrz*

We read Scripture to do God’s word, 2. As they gathered in small groups to read their Bibles in the 1850s, our spiritual ancestors soon learned that they were to be “doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves” (James 1:22). As Covenant pastor Glen Wiberg wrote of one such group, meeting in the Swedish province of Värmland, they “gathered . . . around the gospel and made the remarkable discovery that because of grace they were also bound to the needs of neighbor” (*This Side of the River*, p. 75). Inspired by their encounter with the Bible, members of this small group pooled their scarce funds to buy the freedom of boys and girls forced to work off their parents’ debts as farmhands and servants. Like Francke in Halle, they founded a children’s home and school. As followers of Jesus, the living word, the members of this conventicle learned “to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world” (James 1:27). But what’s most remarkable is that the leader of this initiative to care for children in distress was herself a widow, with six children of her own: Maria Nilsson (also known as Mor i Vall, or “Mother at Vall Farm”). Better than most, she and the other women in her group knew that reading the word kept them from conforming to the world, by prompting them to care for those the world neglected. At Maria’s funeral in 1870, her son Carl Johan Nyvall, an early Covenant evangelist, preached from the Gospel of Matthew: “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me” (18:5). —*Chris Gehrz*

We read Scripture to do God’s word, 3. In 1963 Covenant pastors attending the annual meeting of the Ministerium, issued a joint

pastoral letter to every Covenant congregation. The letter identified the racial tension rocking the nation and acknowledged the unity of black and white Christians within the body of Christ, quoting Galatians 3:26. Noting further the suffering currently experienced by black members of Christ's body, the letter called all Covenanters to repentance for indifference to this suffering that, according to 1 Corinthians 12:26, was their own ("when one member suffers, all suffer together"). The pastors' searching of Scripture led to the exhortation to active pursuit of racial justice. "We feel...that the present crises might well drive us to a more diligent examination of the Holy Scriptures, which we deem the only perfect rule for faith and conduct. What do these Scriptures say?" They go on to quote Micah 6:8 ("What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God"), the Golden Rule (Matthew 7:12), Jesus's call to love both fellow Christian and stranger (John 13:35; Matthew 25:35, 40), and Jesus's call to self-denial and suffering (Mark 8:34; 2 Timothy 1:8). Interestingly, the letter acknowledges that fear of interracial marriage as likely a significant source of resistance to integration. Nevertheless, the pastors encourage Covenanters not to allow a matter about which Scripture does not speak to justify disobedience to Scripture's clear teaching: "It is important to remember, however, that, whereas the Scriptures repeatedly condemn the lack of justice, love, and mercy among us, they are silent on the question of intermarriage. Shall we then speak with conviction where the Bible is silent and have nothing to say where it speaks with a single unmistakable voice?" The letter concludes with a sobering warning that both pastor and laity will be accountable "for the way we handle his Word and treat our brothers and sisters in Christ whose color is different from ours." Scripture teaches us what we must do; our reading of Scripture leads us to action, according to Scripture's clear teaching. —*Hauna Ondrey*

We read Scripture to do God's word, 4. As a denomination founded by Scandinavian immigrants has become increasingly diverse, the Covenant has both changed and remained much the same. Whether in nineteenth-century Sweden or twenty-first-century North America, for example, Covenanters continue to read Scripture in order to do God's word. Consider some recent history from Long Beach, California, where Fountain of Life Covenant Church was planted in 2007. At an early Bible study, a visitor named Mike Martinez heard the story of Jesus miraculously feeding the five thousand (John 6:1–15).

It could not have been more meaningful for a young man who had survived a difficult upbringing, with stints in juvenile detention, to go on to receive culinary training at the Cordon Bleu. “Chef could not comprehend how much joy Jesus felt after feeding thousands of people,” recalled his pastor, John Teter. Chef Mike not only became a follower of Jesus in 2008, but joined with others at Fountain of Life to start a restaurant in 2014. 5000 Pies not only serves great pizza and sweet pies to people in West Long Beach, it also offers employment and job training. As Chef Mike told *L.A. Weekly*, “My boss always says that we can make the best pizza in town, but if we didn’t transform lives in the process, we failed.” Through 5000 Pies and the tutoring and ESL programs of the church’s Family Center, the people of Fountain of Life seek to do the word they read in Scripture: to live out Luke 4:18 by “proclaiming good news to the poor” in their community. —*Chris Gehrz*

Conclusion

From the beginning to today, Covenanters have been “readers.” We read Scripture frequently, not on Sunday alone but as our daily bread. We read Scripture devotionally, as the altar where we meet God and are transformed into Christ’s image. We read Scripture together, aware of our limitations and so reading humbly, open to the gift of fresh readings brought by our brothers and sisters in Christ. We read Scripture responsively, seeking to discern and do God’s will in the world, for God’s glory and neighbor’s good.

The following striking image comes from David Nyvall (1863-1946) and reminds us that what we find in Scripture depends in no small part on what we seek in Scripture, “Go to it with an eye only for error and contradictions, grammatical anomalies, historical errors, mistaken dates and numbers, and the Bible is big enough for a scholarship of only these things. But go to it with an eye for the life that billows forth in mighty waves in the watercourses, burst here and there, and you will be rewarded infinitely more. The Bible is a world that should be studied with a telescope rather than a microscope. What a loss it would be to study the stars or the northern lights with a magnifying glass!” —*Hauna Ondrey*

CONTRIBUTORS:



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