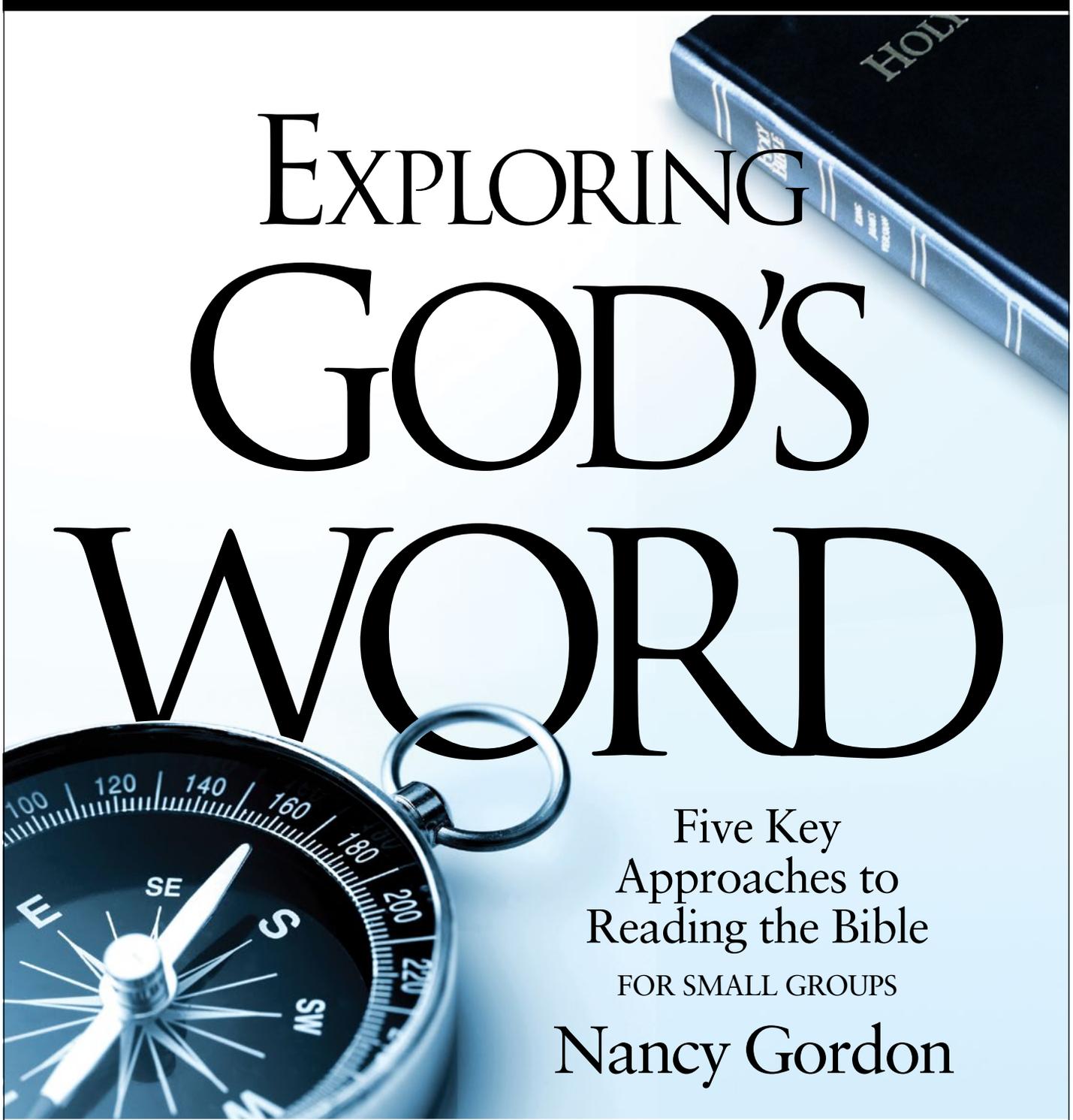


A DISCIPLE-FORMING RESOURCE

A blue Bible with 'HOLY' visible on the cover and a silver compass are positioned in the background. The compass is in the lower-left foreground, showing cardinal and intercardinal directions (E, SE, S, SW) and degree markings (100, 120, 140, 160, 180, 200, 220).

EXPLORING GOD'S WORD

Five Key
Approaches to
Reading the Bible
FOR SMALL GROUPS

Nancy Gordon

The Evangelical Covenant Church

EXPLORING GOD'S WORD

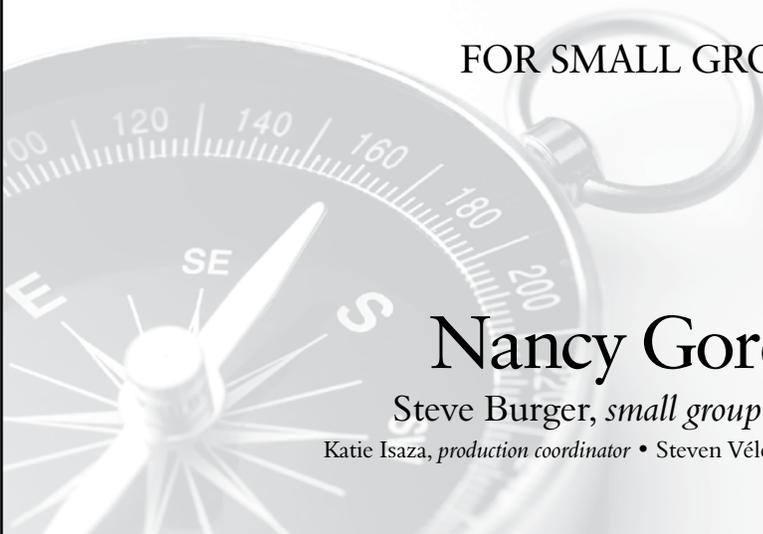
Five Key Approaches to
Reading the Bible

FOR SMALL GROUPS

Nancy Gordon

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The Resource Paper includes Scripture passages from the following translations: Today's New International Version (TNIV), New International Version (NIV), New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). All Scripture in the Small Group Experience segment of this resource is taken from Today's New International Version (TNIV), Zondervan, unless otherwise noted.

Scripture taken from the Holy Bible, Today's New International[®] Version TNIV[®]. Copyright 2001, 2005 by International Bible Society[®]. Used by permission of International Bible Society[®]. All rights reserved worldwide.

The African Bible Study Method Scripture, referenced in session two, was introduced by the African Delegation to the Lambeth Conference of the Anglican Church. It is known both by the name "Lambeth" as well as "African."

Website: CovChurch.org

For information: mdd@covchurch.org

To download: CovChurch.org/resources

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Exploring God's Word

Welcome to the “Exploring God’s Word” small group learning experience. Together you will be working through five key approaches and three key commitments to reading the Bible. This resource is based on the Resource Paper “The Evangelical Covenant Church and the Bible,” which was adopted at the 2008 Annual Meeting of The Evangelical Covenant Church.

Each session is divided into two major segments: “Reading” and “Exploring.”

The first major segment—Reading—contains a selection from the resource paper along with two reflection questions. Although it is recommended that the reading and two reflection questions be completed in preparation for your gathering, it can be incorporated within the small group experience.

The second major segment—Exploring—is divided into five parts:

- *Gathering*—includes a group prayer experience
- *Sharing*—questions or exercises to compare current personal experience with the topics, includes review of reading and reflection questions
- *Examining*—explores the paper, includes additional questions and exercises
- *Personal Reflections*—participants reflect on application of approaches and commitments
- *Closing*—a group response to God

Adaptation for shorter gathering times: Each session can be divided into two portions and thus expand this study to ten sessions. The division could be made as follows:

- *First Portion*—Gathering; Sharing (Include time to read and discuss together the reading and reflection questions)
- *Second Portion*—Examining (Include a brief review of previous session); Personal Reflections; Closing

For your convenience, the text of the Resource Paper is included in this study. The Resource Paper may also be downloaded from www.covchurch.org/resource

As you explore God’s word together it is our hope that through the working of the Holy Spirit and the gathering of God’s people your understanding will not only be enriched but you will grow closer to God and to one another. We anticipate that this experience will enable you and those in your group to more fully and wholeheartedly love God and love others.



The Evangelical Covenant Church and the Bible



PART ONE | READING

The Evangelical Covenant Church and the Bible

We are people of the book. That book is the Bible. Central to the life of the Evangelical Covenant Church, the Bible reveals God and God's intent for us and our world. By it we discover our identity and mission as individuals and as a church. By it we are brought to new life in Jesus Christ, life in God's kingdom. The Covenant Church was begun by people who were known as "readers" because of their deep love for the Bible. By reading the Bible both individually and in corporate worship, they sought to understand it and to allow it to bear fruit in their lives.

Our passion for Scripture rises out of our conviction that the Bible's message comes from God and enables life at peace with God and with our neighbors. Here we see God offering this new kind of life, first through Israel and then ultimately through Jesus Christ. At the very heart of our commitment to Scripture is the conviction that Jesus was and is eternally the living Word of God (John 1:1-18), the supreme revelation of God. The living Word, Jesus Christ, and the written word of Scripture belong together. We believe the Bible is God's word because it communicates to us the living Word, Jesus Christ. In Christ we understand who God is and in Christ we discover our own true identity. Scripture reveals God at work to create a people for himself, to forgive them, free them from evil, and to establish his kingdom among them (1 Peter 2:9-10).

We are convinced that the Holy Spirit of God by whom the living Word became incarnate also inspired the Bible and still illumines and transforms readers of the Old and New Testaments. "For the

word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12). The Spirit works through these Scriptures to bring about new life in Christ, which is a central Covenant conviction and the basis of our unity.

The Preamble to the Covenant Constitution affirms the centrality of the Bible for faith and practice by saying, "the Holy Scripture, the Old and New Testament, is the Word of God and the only perfect rule for faith, doctrine, and conduct." This conviction is repeated four times in Covenant Affirmations. Both Testaments, the sixty-six books of the Protestant canon, are together embraced and understood to provide an overarching account of God's revealing and redemptive work begun in creation, continued in Israel, and culminating in Jesus Christ.

With such a commitment to Scripture, early Covenant people constantly asked the question, "Where is it written?" when dealing with questions of doctrine or practice. This was not mere proof-texting; it was a determination to understand the intent of the whole of Scripture and the way it should be appropriated for life and thought. That question still guides us. In all we believe, do, and say, we place ourselves under the authority of God's written word and seek its direction. Scripture itself is our compass, not formulations about Scripture or about its inspiration. Our great passion is constantly to renew our commitment to the authority of God as revealed in the Scriptures. Our desire is to keep alive, strong, and always growing the flame that first burned in our forbearers for the authority and power of God's word. For these reasons, developing a shared understanding of how we read Scripture is critical for our life together.

How the Covenant Church Reads Scripture

In order to be faithful to Christ and the Scriptures, Covenant people have specific convictions about how we read the Bible, even while recognizing that not all Covenanters read Scripture with the same result. We are well aware of both the diversity of readings and the value of that diversity. It is like playing a musical piece—no two performances are exactly the same. Differences arise from the skill and experience of the players, the instruments they use, the key in which they choose to play, the rhythm and style they prefer, and the setting in which the music is played. There is freedom in interpreting a piece of music. Yet the music remains determinative and pulls together the individual differences of the players, instruments, and settings into its own unity and reality.

Yet, within the diversity of performance, there are still rules for playing music well, and some players will be better than others. The analogy does not suggest, “Anything goes.” Musical interpretation is determined primarily by the musical score itself and to a certain degree by the traditions of the musical community and by the audience who hears it. Thus not all interpretations of a piece of music—or of Scripture—are equally faithful to the score or the text.

One important aspect of this analogy is that music must be played. Performance is not merely explanation; it is text translated into life. If a musician does not perform the music, the music is merely notes on a page. So it is with Scripture. If the text is not acted out in our lives, even though it is the word of God it is left as merely words on a page (James 1:22-25).

Reflection Questions

- 1) What does the reading say about the Bible as the word of God?

- 2) How is your identity being shaped by the Bible and the living Word, Jesus?



PART TWO | EXPLORING

Gathering

Welcome to the “Exploring God’s Word” small group learning experience. This session, and the four that follow, describes five ways Covenanters are able to live out Scripture and offers three commitments for doing that well and faithfully. At our best, we as Covenant people read the Bible faithfully, communally, rigorously, charitably, holistically and with commitments to grace, transformation, and mission.

The purpose of approaching Scripture in a small group setting is to support and learn from one another. Begin by sharing a little about yourself including the answer to the following question:

- 1) At what age did you first experience reading the Bible for yourself?

Take a moment to engage in either personal or group prayer, asking that you would be aware of God’s presence in your group as you begin this journey into God’s word.

Sharing

Either as pairs or as a whole group, reflect together on the following questions.

- 1) What was your understanding of the Bible at the time you first read it?

- 2) Has your understanding of what the Bible is changed since then? If so, how?

Review. Take a moment to quietly review the Reading for this session. Begin by sharing your thoughts on the two reflection questions. Then give time to any other reflections brought about by the reading.

Examining

Depending on the size of your small group, divide either into pairs or groups, each taking one of the passages of Scripture (John 1:1-18; James 1:22-25; Hebrews 4:12) which are quoted or referenced in the Resource Paper. In your pair or group, discuss the following questions and be prepared to share your thoughts with the larger group. (*Note: These are just a few of the many relevant texts about Scripture.*)

- 1) What does this passage reveal about Scripture?
- 2) How does this passage “convict” you when you reflect on your own practice of reading and understanding Scripture?

The Resource Paper states, “Our great passion is constantly to renew our commitment to the authority of God as revealed in the Scriptures. Our desire is to keep alive, strong, and always growing the flame that first burned in our forbearers for the authority and power of God’s word. For these reasons, developing a shared understanding of how we read Scripture is critical for our life together.”

Reflection. How would you describe your own congregation’s approach to the reading and hearing of Scripture? What value do you see in having a commonly understood Covenant approach to Scripture?

Personal Reflection

- 1) What have you learned about the way you approach God’s word?
- 2) Make note of anything you have experienced in this session that will affect the way you approach God’s word in the future.

Closing

Spend time sharing prayer requests and praying for each other.

Recognizing that the purpose of Scripture is to make us a people of God, we invite you to close this session with the following responsive reading based on 1 Peter 2:9-10.

We are God’s own people

We have been chosen to be God’s holy people

Once we were not a people

But now we are God’s people

We were chosen so that we might proclaim
God’s mighty acts,

*The ways God called us from darkness to his
marvelous light.*

Once we had not received mercy,

But now we have received mercy.

ALL: We are God’s own people.

For Next Session

Before the next small group gathering, remember to read the “Reading” section and answer the two reflection questions in the session that follows.



We Read the Bible Faithfully and Communally



PART ONE | READING

At our best we as Covenant people read the Bible faithfully, communally, rigorously, charitably, holistically and with commitments to grace, transformation, and mission.

We Read the Bible Faithfully

First, Covenant people read the Bible faithfully in keeping with its character and its concerns. Since it is the word of God, a faithful reading is a prayerful reading. We come to the text asking that God's Spirit will instruct us and transform us. Central to the formation of the Covenant Church is the pietistic concern for encounter with God. As stated in the final report of the Covenant Committee on Freedom and Theology in 1963, "To read it [the Bible] properly...is to find it an altar where one meets the living God..."

A faithful reading is self aware. We each come to the Bible with a lens—a set of assumptions or presuppositions—through which we see and understand. This lens is formed by cultural context, gender, geography, language, our understanding of life, and the personal and historical baggage we all carry. As the Evangelical Covenant Church becomes more and more diverse (which we believe is a movement of the Holy Spirit), we must be attuned and sensitive to the various lenses through which we read the Bible. We must ask ourselves what our respective lenses might be and how a given lens might hinder or help our reading. We must be sensitive enough to listen well to others reading with lenses different from our own.

A faithful reading must also be in line with God's intent. A glance at church history underscores the ease with which we can miss God's message. The church has too often strayed into sin far outside the boundaries of faithful interpreta-

tion (for example, attempts to justify colonization, slavery, and racism, an assumption of the inferiority of women, and indifference to the poor). Whether deliberate or unintentional, the Bible has often been misused as a means to protect a way of life or maintain a hold on power and resources.

Regardless of the reason, the record of misreadings in Christian history is cause for humility in our own reading of the Bible. It should cause us to pause before we make authoritative statements about a particular interpretation of a passage—especially if it is an interpretation on which Christians authentically disagree. Simply put: we sometimes get it wrong. When reading faithfully, we will often find the Bible challenging the way we live rather than affirming it. The Bible pierces to the depths of our souls and "judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12).

We Read the Bible Communally

Second, by the very nature of Covenant life, we read the Bible communally. Interpretation of Scripture is not a task we do in isolation (2 Peter 1:20-21). None of us has the breadth of experience, intellectual skill, social sensitivity, or spiritual depth to interpret the Scriptures alone. Our reading is informed by our identity and experiences, including our gender, economic status, and culture. None of us has experience sufficiently broad so that we may grasp all about which Scripture speaks. The Holy Spirit, the same Spirit that inspired the text, helps us in our reading and discussion, and the community of faith—both past and present—provides assistance in hearing the text. The Holy Spirit and the community of faith work in concert with each other to guide the task of reading and listening well.

The Covenant Church defines "community of faith" not only as our own denomination (with its churches, history and affirmations), but, as the

opening to Covenant Affirmations defines it, the whole apostolic, catholic, Reformation, and evangelical tradition that has been passed down to us. We seek to read faithfully in the context of the historic creeds of the church. Whenever we say that we are a non-creedal church, we mean that we have chosen to allow the text to be primary in our faith, doctrine, and conduct. We have worked hard not to allow particular interpretations of texts to take precedence over the text itself to guide our life together. We acknowledge and learn from Christian traditions and thinkers different from our own. What is faithful or right is not always immediately clear. To read with both the Holy Spirit and the community of faith requires discernment. We discern together—not in isolation—the Holy Spirit’s work in this world, in our hearts, and in the community of faith over time. It is central to the character of the Covenant Church that we have consistently made decisions to trust in the sufficiency of the Holy Spirit speaking through the community to guide us in our discernment.

Our commitment to reading communally encourages Covenanters to read together frequently both in worship and in study and to share our readings with one another in a forthright and direct manner. It creates a culture of mutual openness and generosity among us and among our diverse cultural contexts. This in turn creates the kind of spiritual maturity that helps us live with the ambiguity often present in our life together. Such a communal reading allows the Bible, in concert with the Holy Spirit, to do its powerful work. “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that all God’s people may be thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

Reflection Questions

The Resource Paper states that reading the Bible faithfully means we should:

- read prayerfully, seeking the Holy Spirit’s guidance,
- be aware of the lenses and biases we bring to our reading,

- recognize that history is full of examples of our misunderstanding of the intent of God’s word, and that we should, therefore,
- read the Bible with humility.

- 1) Reflecting on these four aspects of reading faithfully, which one do you do best and which one do you need to improve on?
- 2) The Resource Paper suggests that we cannot understand Scripture entirely on our own—that we need to read and discern the meaning of Scripture as a faith community that is dependent on the Holy Spirit and takes into account the larger church and the historic church. How have you experienced (or not experienced) such a communal reading and understanding of Scripture?



PART TWO | EXPLORING

Gathering

Share: How have you seen the word of God lived out in your life or in the lives of others since we last met?

When we read Scripture, we go before God asking for understanding and learning to occur. Begin your session by asking God to open your hearts to the wisdom of the word. Pray your own words, or read the following prayer in unison:

“O Lord, we thank you for your holy word. We enter into it with the expectation that you will speak to us. Holy Spirit, guide our minds and open our hearts that we might be attentive to your word and receptive to your will. Amen.”

Sharing

Option 1. Either in pairs or as a whole group, reflect together on the following question:

- 1) How was Scripture viewed in the culture in which you grew up? How is Scripture viewed in the culture in which you live today?

- 2) Can you name some of the lenses you bring to the reading of Scripture?

Option 2. Have one third of the group look through a glass, one third through plastic, and one third through a tinted glass (cup, bottle). Have each group describe what they see. Or, have each person in the group look through all three and describe what they see.

- 1) What were the differences and the similarities?

- 2) Which one is reality?

- 3) How might interpretation of Scripture be influenced by one's lens or culture?

Review. Take a moment to quietly review the Reading for this session. Begin by sharing your thoughts on the two reflection questions. Then give time to any other reflections brought about by the reading.

Examining

Form groups of three to five people. If you have fewer than six people, this can be done as a whole group exercise. Assign each group a passage of Scripture (Genesis 12:1-8; Jeremiah 1:4-9; Luke 1:26-38; or Mark 10:17-27) to read using the African Bible Study Method. You will use the following steps to listen and respond to your Scripture passage. As you listen, seek the Holy Spirit's guidance, testing what you hear with the character and concerns of the word of God so that your hearing may be in line with God's intent.

- 1) One person slowly reads the passage aloud.
- 2) Each person silently identifies the word or phrase that catches their attention (1 minute).
- 3) Each person shares the word or phrase around the group (3-5 minutes; this should be a time of sharing and listening, not discussion).
- 4) Someone else reads the passage again slowly from a different translation, if available.
- 5) Each person silently identifies where this passage touches their life today (1 minute).
- 6) Each person shares with the group (3-5 minutes; this should be a time of sharing and listening, not discussion).
- 7) The passage is read a third time by another person, using another translation if possible.
- 8) Each person names or writes a response. "From what I've heard and shared, what do I believe God wants me to do or be? Is God inviting me to change in any way?" (5 minutes).
- 9) Each person shares their answer (5-10 minutes; this should be a time of sharing and listening, not discussion).
- 10) Each person prays for the person to their right, praying specifically for the things that person has shared (5 minutes).
- 11) Close with the Lord's Prayer and a time of silence.

Reflection. Discuss your experience of communally reading Scripture using the African Bible

Study Method. Was your understanding of the Scripture changed in any way by the responses of others in the group? If so, how? What other ways do you suggest that the church could encourage communal reading of Scripture?

The resource paper calls for us to experience, as communal readings, the reading of Scripture in worship and the sharing of Scripture in study. It further states that we might need to live with ambiguity regarding certain passages. How well do we as a church do that? As a denomination, how well do we do that? What suggestions would you make for improving our ability to listen to one another and to the Holy Spirit?

Personal Reflection

In this session we explored how to read the Bible:

- *Faithfully*—By developing an awareness of the lenses through which we view Scripture; Through being open to being challenged and changed by the word
- *Communally*—Understanding that the Holy Spirit and the community of faith work in concert; Remembering that we stand on the shoulders of other saints

1) What have you learned so far about the way that you approach God’s word?

2) How in the future might you be more conscious of the Holy Spirit?

3) Make note of anything you have experienced in this session that will affect the way you approach God’s word in the future.

Faithfully:

Communally:

Closing

With the whole group, discuss ways each of you can commit to reading the Bible more faithfully and/or communally between now and the next session.

Close your session with a time of informal prayer, taking time to share prayer requests and pray for each other; or together, read aloud the prayer from the beginning of the session:

“O Lord, we thank you for your holy word. We have entered into it with the expectation that you would speak to us. Holy Spirit, continue to guide our minds and open our hearts that we might always be receptive to your will. Amen.”

For the Next Session:

Please bring Bible study helps such as Bible dictionaries, Bible handbooks, annotated study Bibles, Bible atlases, and translations of the Bible. Also consider visiting the North Park Theological Seminary website for additional resources. Go to www.northpark.edu/sem/resources/biblical.html.

Before the next small group gathering, remember to read the “Reading” section and answer the two reflection questions in the session that follows.



We Read the Bible Rigorously and Charitably



PART ONE | READING

At our best we as Covenant people read the Bible faithfully, communally, rigorously, charitably, holistically and with commitments to grace, transformation, and mission.

We Read the Bible Rigorously

Third, we read Scripture rigorously. We recognize these writings for what they are in their original historical and cultural contexts. We realize that there is a distance between us and the first readers of Scripture. It was not originally written to us, but the Bible's words are for us and about us. God speaks to us through these words. We see ourselves mirrored in its pages. The biblical books were written to people long ago. They are nonetheless relevant and authoritative, even though our world is quite different from the world of the Bible (1 Corinthians 10:11). Belief in the Bible's power and authority to transform us does not mean that understanding happens automatically. All our intellectual capacities are brought to the task of interpretation, and we make use of available information and scholarly tools to bridge the gap between the ancient text and our own lives. Critical to this task is the willingness to hear the text and obey. Since the Bible was written to people in ancient contexts, reading it calls for interpretive skill and for insight into how language and texts work. We seek to understand what texts meant in their original contexts and then to discern how that meaning is appropriated for the church today. Some of the hard work has been done in translations, and a whole community of scholars serves and works with the church to assist the process of understanding. Yet every Christian has the privilege and responsibility to take part in the communal reading of the text.

We Read the Bible Charitably

Fourth, we read Scripture charitably with regard to differing interpretations on matters not central to our core beliefs. "Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love" (Ephesians 4:2). The Covenant's emphasis on "life together" in Christ as the unifying bond has profoundly shaped our understanding of both faith and Scripture. This commitment has historically kept Covenanters united in times when it would have been easier to divide over such issues as baptism, atonement, or the nature of the inspiration of Scripture. While a variety of views about Scripture has always been present in the Covenant, two things are clear: we do not waver on the authority of Scripture, nor do we accept explanations that do not do justice to the character of Scripture.

Our charity with regard to differing interpretations is not without limits. Not all readings are equally convincing or determinative for the church. We have central, clear convictions about Christian doctrine and Christian life, which are reflected in our Covenant Affirmations. We have biblical convictions about difficult issues, which are reflected in our polity. We are willing to challenge biblical interpretations that stray too far from the central convictions of the Covenant Church. So our charity is not based in uncertainty of thought, but in humility, mutual submission, and concern for the unity of the church (Ephesians 4:3, 4:15, 5:21). We are committed to the core of the Christian faith, but differences on matters where Christians have historically disagreed are no grounds for division. Rather they are an opportunity for reaching out to each other, for growth and for mutual instruction.

Reflection Questions

- 1) How would understanding the historical and cultural context in which the Bible was first written help you in applying God's word to your own life?

- 2) The core beliefs of the Evangelical Covenant Church are outlined in our Affirmations.¹ They are: the centrality of the word of God; the necessity of the new birth; a commitment to the whole mission of the church; the church as a fellowship of believers; a conscious dependence on the Holy Spirit; and the reality of freedom in Christ. How do these match with your own core beliefs? Would you add any others?

PART TWO | EXPLORING

Gathering

Share: How has your awareness of reading the Bible faithfully and communally affected the way you have read and lived out God's word since we last met?

Reading Scripture calls us to use the best possible resources to learn about the world reflected in what we read. But even when we look at these resources, we often come to different conclusions about what a particular passage means and calls us to do. In this session we will explore how we discern the reason for our differences and carry on amiable discussions about them.

Share a concern for the community or the world. After you've each shared your concern, go around again speaking to the source of information

¹For more information on the Covenant Affirmations go to www.covchurch.org/resource and type in "Covenant Affirmations" in the search box.

for this concern, including any biblical reference. Discuss briefly together how sources are evaluated and how different sources of information, as well as different interpretations of biblical passages, can lead to different concerns or to different stances on the same issue.

Pray together for the concerns named and for charity in your relationships.

Sharing

Either in pairs or as a whole group, reflect together on the following questions:

- 1) To what persons or resources have you turned to discern what God's word means?

- 2) How have you resolved differences in interpretation with others?

Review. Take a moment to quietly review the Reading for this session. Begin by sharing your thoughts on the two reflection questions. Then give time to any other reflections brought about by the reading.

Examining

Read either Mark 1:1-28 or Mark 10:13-34 individually and silently, and make note of:

- geographic names and terms
- possible connections with Old Testament Scriptures and events
- persons named
- physical locations
- occupations
- repeated words and phrases
- figures of speech

After the reading, compile a common list of topics related to the Mark passage that your group would

like to explore further. Have each person choose one of the topics on the list. This could also be done in pairs. Each person or pair should use Bible study tools such as a Bible dictionary, annotated study Bibles, maps, Bible handbooks, and different translations to explore the chosen topic. Allow time for persons or teams to share something they learned. After the sharing, read the Scripture portion aloud.

Reflection. Discuss briefly the impact of research on your understanding of the passage. Did you gain understanding of the time and place in the passage? What are the connections with the passage that we can make today? How does it encourage us or challenge us in our walk with Christ?

Discuss briefly the possibility of differing ideas and interpretations arising out of a common reading of the same passage. Did the group experience that as they looked at Mark 1 or Mark 10? What does a charitable reading of Scripture mean to the church?

Personal Reflection

In this session, we explored how to read the Bible:

- *Rigorously*—Recognizing cultural, historical context; Discerning communally what it means for the church today
- *Charitably*—Recognizing different interpretations on matters not central to our core beliefs; Emphasizing “Life Together” in Christ as our unifying bond

1) What have you learned about the way that you approach God’s word?

2) Make note of anything you have experienced in this session that will affect the way you approach God’s word in the future.

Rigorously:

Charitably:

Closing

Option 1: Together, in unison, read the following prayer from Ephesians 4:1-5:

“Help us, Lord, to lead a life worthy of that to which you have called us. Help us to live in all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, and helping us to remember there is one body, one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. Amen.”

Option 2: Sing or read together as a prayer “We Are One in the Spirit” found in The Covenant Hymnal (1973). You may also choose to allow time for people in your group to share prayer requests and pray for each other.

For the Next Session

Before the next small group gathering, remember to read the “Reading” section and answer the two reflection questions in the session that follows.



We Read the Bible Holistically and with a Commitment to Grace



PART ONE | READING

At our best we as Covenant people read the Bible faithfully, communally, rigorously, charitably, holistically and with commitments to grace, transformation, and mission.

We Read the Bible Holistically

Fifth, we read the Bible holistically, allowing Scripture to interpret Scripture. When early Covenanters asked each other “Where is it written?” they were certainly looking for specific scriptural texts, but they also wanted to know what the entirety of Scripture said on a topic or specific issue. No single Scripture passage is by itself the word of God; each passage is the word of God only as part of the whole scriptural story of God’s election of Israel and the fulfilling of God’s promises in Jesus Christ. Covenanters affirm that all the parts of Scripture are inspired by God, but it is the whole of the Bible, not just some parts, that helps us to interpret faithfully how to live and what to believe. This allows the more clear passages of the Bible to help interpret the confusing or troubling (or even painful) ones. This interpretive rule also assumes that any individual passage of Scripture is read in terms of the whole Bible, and it is read in terms of the narrative movement and direction of the Bible as a whole.

Committed to Grace

To these five ways of reading Scripture we add three essential commitments. The first is a commitment to grace. Grace is central to the character of God and the gospel. By grace God reconciles humanity through Jesus Christ and gives us new life in Christ (Romans 3:21-26; Ephesians 2:6-8). Jesus taught the authority of this key movement of grace.

In response to those who elevated Scriptural teaching about ritual purity above Scriptural teaching about regard for fellow human beings, he quoted the prophet Hosea saying, “But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice’” (Matthew 9:13). In the same way Jesus gave priority to scriptural commands to love both God and neighbor (Matthew 22:36-40 and parallels). The Apostle Paul continued this primary emphasis on God’s grace in Jesus Christ. Particularly in Romans and Galatians, but indeed in all of his letters, Paul argued passionately for the primacy of God’s grace.

It is no accident that Paul began and ended every letter with reference to grace, as if to remind his readers that all of life is lived within the parameters of grace. Grace is not merely a gift God gives us; grace is God giving us himself and drawing us into relationship through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We have experienced the loving Father receiving us as wayward children. We, like Peter, know what it is to deny our Lord, yet be restored to his service. Like Cornelius and Lydia, although we did not belong, we have been made members of God’s family. Consequently, we want to be a people who extend that same grace to each other and throughout the broken world.

Grace entails living with God and it becomes the motivating and empowering force toward living for God. This understanding of grace does not give license to wrong-doing. Instead, we are invited, encouraged, and expected to live out the grace we have received. This priority on grace—drawn from the character of God, the actions of Jesus, the teaching of Scripture, and affirmed especially in the Reformation—is perhaps the strongest feature of Covenant identity. It is the responsibility of every Covenant Church to live out this grace in the context of its own ministry. It is grace lived out that enables—even requires—reading charitably and

communally.

Reflection Questions

- 1) What is your response to the statement “no single passage is by itself the word of God”?

- 2) What does grace mean to you?

PART TWO | EXPLORING

Gathering

Share: How has your awareness of reading the Bible rigorously and charitably affected the way you have read and lived out God’s word since we last met?

While we most often read an isolated passage of Scripture, the text for this week’s study challenges us to interpret a passage in light of the whole Bible story. This means we need to know how the parts build the whole.

Write on a card or paper a title and a short summary of your favorite biblical story or passage. Next, form a line, so that the stories are in chronological order.

Take turns sharing your story and tell why you chose it.

Discuss briefly how easy or difficult it was for the group to put the stories in order. What did the exercise show you about your understanding of the whole biblical story? Share how any of the other stories impact the way you view or interpret yours?

Sharing

Either in pairs or as a whole group, work through the following exercise.

- 1) First, begin by drawing a line down the middle of a piece of paper or newsprint.
- 2) On one half of the paper, using only John 3:16, list important biblical topics that you see in this passage.
- 3) On the other half of the paper, list what important biblical topics are missing.
- 4) Did you add ideas to the passage that were based on your broader understanding of God’s word?
- 5) What could happen to our understanding of Scripture if we read a couple of passages without understanding the whole of God’s word?

Review. Take a moment to quietly review the Reading for this session. Begin by sharing your thoughts on the two reflection questions. Then give time to any other reflections brought about by the reading.

Examining

Divide into three groups. Have each group take one of the biblical persons referenced in the section “Reading the Bible with a Commitment to Grace” and read together the passage(s) about that character.

- Peter (John 13:31-36, John 18:15-18, 25-27, John 21: 15-19)
- Cornelius (Acts 10:1-48)
- Lydia and the Jailer (Acts 16:11-39)

In these groups, discuss in what way the character’s story is an example of grace. What was the cost—to them or to others—of the grace they received? After you’ve discussed these questions, choose one person to tell a character’s story to the larger group, weaving in the answers to the above questions.

Reflection. How do the experiences of the biblical characters in the passages above connect with your own story of receiving grace?

The resource paper notes, “This priority on grace—drawn from the character of God, the actions of Jesus, the teaching of Scripture, and affirmed especially in the Reformation—is perhaps the strongest feature of Covenant identity. It is the responsibility of every Covenant Church to live out this grace in the context of their own ministry.”

- 1) How would you assess your own personal living out of grace? How well does your congregation live out this grace?

Personal Reflection

In this session we explored how to read the Bible:

- *Holistically*—Interpreting the passage within the context of the whole of Scripture; understanding that no single passage is by itself the word of God
- *With a Commitment to Grace*—Understanding grace as central to the character of God and the gospel; experiencing grace as we live with God and for God

- 1) What have you learned about the way that you approach God’s word from this session?

- 2) Make note of anything you have experienced in this session that will affect the way you approach God’s word in the future.

Holistically:

With commitment to grace:

Closing

Option 1. Read together 2 Timothy 3:16-17 (TNIV):

“All Scripture is God breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that all God’s people may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

Spend a few moments individually and prayerfully reflecting on what this mean to you and the church.

Option 2. Read or sing together this hymn and prayer, “Son of God, Eternal Savior” (This hymn can be sung to hymn tunes Beach Spring, Hyfydol, Holy Manna, and Nettleton. See *The Covenant Hymnal: A Worshipbook* index for the music.)

Son of God, eternal Savior,
Source of life and truth and grace,
Son of Man, whose birth incarnate
Hallows all our human race,
Bind us all as one together
In thy Church’s sacred fold,
Weak and healthy, poor and wealthy,
Sad and joyful, young and old.

As thou, Lord, hast lived for others,
So may we for others live;
Freely have thy gifts been granted,
Freely may thy servants give.
Come, O Christ, and reign among us,
King of love, and Prince of peace,
Hush the storm of strife and passion,
Bid its cruel discords cease:

Son of God, eternal Savior,
Source of life and truth and grace,
Son of Man, whose birth incarnate
Hallows all our human race,
Thou Who prayest, thou Who willest,
That thy people should be one,
Grant, O Grant our hope’s fruition:
Here on earth thy will be done.

Words by Somerset Corry Lowry (1855-1932), alt.

You may also choose to allow time for people in your group to share prayer requests and pray for each other.

For the Next Session

Before the next small group gathering, remember to read the “Reading” section and answer the two reflection questions in the session that follows.



We Read the Bible with a Commitment to Transformation and Mission



PART ONE | READING

At our best we as Covenant people read the Bible faithfully, communally, rigorously, charitably, holistically and with commitments to grace, transformation, and mission.

We Read with a Commitment to Transformation

The second commitment is to transformation. It is crucial that in our reading we consciously come to Scripture with a profound desire and expectation to be transformed by the renewing of our minds (Romans 12:2). We do not just read the Bible. The Bible reads us. The Bible is “living and active,” and we should expect to be changed. We should expect the Bible to do something and —to make a difference both in readers and in their communities. As we read the living word, the living God confronts us and calls us to new life in the kingdom of God.

The Bible is a guide and means to discipleship, and if discipleship is not the result of our reading, we have failed. When we come to Scripture in an attitude of openness, expecting to encounter the life-changing, powerful word, we discover that we are participants in God’s story of love and rescue. Though not originally written to us, this marvelous word is for us. Our own fingerprints on the narrative begin to emerge with every turn of the page. We, too, have bitten into forbidden fruit and paid the price for it. We, too, have wandered through the wilderness, wondering where we will land. We, too, have been overwhelmed by a task, only to discover that God is able and faithful. We, too, have been lost and then found. And in conversion we are placed in the story of Jesus to follow him and live out his purposes. Obedience to the word of

God, which is possible only through the affirming, comforting, and challenging presence of the Holy Spirit, leads to transformation in the life of the disciple and in the life of the church. Conversion is necessary, confession and repentance are required, and change is inevitable. Our reading is transformational, and transformation in all its forms is a primary goal of the church. Jesus’ charge to “make disciples...teaching them to obey everything I have commanded” (Matthew 28:19-20) speaks to the comprehensive task of forming those who follow Jesus so that they look, think, and act like Jesus. We are continual works in progress, ever pilgrims on the way, and we are always “being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory” (2 Corinthians 3:18). As we are transformed, we join our Lord in seeking the transformation of others. It is through transformed people that God transforms the world, and active, passionate use of Scripture is at the heart of all transformation.

We Read with a Commitment to Mission

Our third commitment is to mission. This lies at the foundation of the Covenant’s origin and existence. Early Covenanters were called Mission Friends, and mission is and always has been at the heart of the Covenant Church’s identity. The distinction between evangelism and social ministry or justice was not allowed. Our pietist heritage emphasizes that what we did was for both God’s glory and neighbor’s good. We continue to be friends of God’s mission today. We make the leap off the page in order to be changed and to live out the words we read. In this we follow the example of Jesus himself, who began his own mission as a fulfillment of the words of the prophet Isaiah in Holy Scripture (Luke 4:16-21). Jesus’ mission is ours. Scripture

calls us to join him in the work he is now doing in our world: finding the lost and helping the hurting, restoring the wounded, working for the advance of the good news, and extending God's kingdom in our world. Such action in turn continually reshapes the lenses through which we read. This leap off the page becomes an interpretive rule for Covenanters: valid reading of Scripture leads to obedience and service. At the end of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, "Everyone who hears these words and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on a rock" (Matthew 7:24). When we together enact the mission and life to which the Bible calls us, we become more faithful readers of its words and we give witness to and demonstrate God's grace in our broken world.

By these Covenant convictions regarding Scripture we are called to renew our commitment to a deeper engagement with God's word. May we find "our hearts burning within us" as we grow in our desire to allow the Scriptures to be "opened to us" (Luke 24:32, 44-45). It is our prayer that being a people of the book will never be relegated to warm memories of our history but will be the great passion that drives the movement called the Evangelical Covenant Church. May we truly be like the Bereans who "received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day" (Acts 17:11). We pray that our sheer love for God's word will be matched by profound discipline to be a people who are saved by grace, formed in Christ, guided by the Spirit, propelled into mission, and blessed through the work of God found in God's most holy word.

Reflection Questions

1) How have you been changed by the word of God?

2) In what ways have you been a part of God's mission in the world personally and as a church?



PART TWO | EXPLORING

Gathering

Share: How has your awareness of reading the Bible holistically with a commitment to grace affected the way you have read and lived out God's word since we last met?

The resource paper asks us to consider how we read the Bible and the place it plays in our personal walk with Christ and in our congregation's life and mission. In the portion of the Resource Paper assigned for this session, we are reminded of Jesus's teaching about the wisdom of listening to his words.

Ask someone to read Jesus' words to his disciples found in Matthew 7:24-27. Discuss together whether and how reading and reflecting together on the Resource Paper, "The Evangelical Covenant Church and Bible," has been helpful in listening to Jesus and living God's word.

Sharing

Either in pairs or as a whole group, reflect together on the following questions:

1) In what ways have you experienced the nudging or direction of the Holy Spirit as you have read and meditated on God's word?

2) How would you describe God's mission in the world? Give one example within your own context (i.e., community/neighborhood, work environment, etc.).

Review. Take a moment to quietly review the Reading for this session. Begin by sharing your thoughts on the two reflection questions. Then give time to any other reflections brought about by the reading.

Examining

Individually look at the list below of biblical stories of love and rescue and call. Choose the story you feel most connects with your life and spend 15 minutes reading and reflecting on that story. (Feel free to choose another Bible story that is not listed if it resonates with your life.)

Enter the story with your imagination—What do you see? What do you feel? How does this story connect with your conversion, call to discipleship, and service in ministry? How does the story encourage you and challenge you to join in the work of God?

- Genesis 3 (Eating the apple in the garden and the consequences)
- Exodus 3:1-15 (God's call to Moses to lead the people from slavery in Egypt)
- 1 Samuel 1:1-20 (Hannah prays for a child)
- Psalm 106 (God's works, the people's disobedience, God's mercy)
- John 4:3-42 (Jesus' conversation with the woman at the well)
- Luke 15:11-32 (Jesus' story about the lost son)
- Luke 24:13-35 (Jesus' walk with two disciples on the road to Emmaus)
- Acts 9: 1-19 (Saul meets Jesus on the road to Damascus)

As you enter into this personal reflection time pray together:

Lord Jesus, as we reflect on your word, may your indwelling Spirit enlighten our hearts and our minds and strengthen us for the journey ahead so we might walk in your ways and live our lives within the stream of your good, gracious, and loving will. Amen.

Consider ending your time of reading and reflection by writing what you have sensed the passage calling you to do or be.

Reflection. After the reading and reflection time, come back together as a group to share. Was your experience transforming in some way? How did you find it helpful in renewing your sense of discipleship and mission?

Personal Reflection

In this session we have explored how to read the Bible with a commitment to:

- *Transformation*—Being transformed by the Holy Spirit together with the word of God; Participating in God's story of love and rescue
- *Mission*—Being led by Scripture to join in the work of Christ; Embracing a Spirit-propelled mission

1) What have you learned about the way you approach God's word from this session?

2) Make note of anything you have experienced in this session that will affect the way you approach God's word in the future.

With a commitment to transformation:

With commitment to mission:

Have one person read the following summary paragraph of the paper:

Covenant people, then, read and listen to the Bible: 1) faithfully, with a deep understanding of the power of God's word and our differing interpretive lenses, which requires humility;

2) communally, with the understanding that interpretation calls for the help of both the Holy

Spirit and the entire community of faith, including the historic church represented in the common Christian creeds;

3) rigorously, with the knowledge that the Bible comes to us across a distance of time and culture that calls for study and careful thought;

4) charitably, with regard to differing interpretations of Scripture;

5) holistically, with the belief that it is the movement of the whole Bible that guides us.

Covenant people also read with essential commitments to grace, because grace expresses the very character of God; to transformation, with a profound desire to be changed by our encounter with Scripture; and to mission, because valid reading leads us to join Jesus in the work that he is now doing in our world. These convictions are instruments we use to allow the full score of the music of Scripture to enliven and direct our lives and mission. These ways of reading Scripture overlap and are interrelated. They complement each other and enrich our experience of God's word.

Discuss together how this study has informed and perhaps changed the way you read and understand the Bible. What commitment do you want to make personally to continue this journey of reading Scripture? What could we do as a congregation to continue this journey?

Closing

You may choose to allow time for people in your group to share prayer requests and pray for each other. Then, read in unison Jesus' prayer for the Church, found in John 17:13-23.

"I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them. I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified.

My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me."