

The Gideons International

An Evaluation from the Theological Perspective
of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod
February 2022

History, Beliefs, Practices

Identity:

The Gideons International is an association of Christian businessmen and their wives “dedicated to telling people about Jesus through associating together for service, sharing personal testimony, and providing Bibles and New Testaments.”¹

Founder(s):

John “Nick” Nicholson, Sam Hill and William Knights

Statistics:

According to the Gideons International website, there are 269,500 Gideons and Auxiliary members (the wives of Gideons) in 200 countries. Since its founding in 1899, Gideons International has distributed 2 billion Bibles and New Testaments worldwide.² Gideon spending on the production of Bibles has been reduced by about \$10 million per year, due to a backlog of inventory and a drop in the number of hotels accepting Bibles.³

History

In 1898, John Nicholson shared a hotel room with Sam Hill, another businessman. Finding that they were both Christians, they prayed together and discussed the need for an association for Christian traveling salesmen. In a meeting in 1899, Nicholson, Hill and a newcomer, William Knights, adopted the name Gideons for their new association. In 1900, the 37 businessmen at the association’s first national convention passed this resolution: “That every hotel, which Gideons patronize, furnish a Holy Bible for the benefit of its patrons.”⁴ In 1908, the Gideons decided to put Bibles in every hotel in the country, using donations supplied by a ministerial association, a decision leading to partnership with churches in funding Bible distribution. By 1916, Bibles were

¹ <https://gideons.org/about>, accessed July 3, 2021.

² <https://gideons.org/about>, accessed July 12, 2021.

³ Daniel Silliman, “Why Gideons International Is Scaling Back Bible Printing,” *Christianity Today*, March 17, 2020, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2020/april/gideons-bible-printer-closes-refocuses-rebalances.html>, accessed July 5, 2021.

⁴ Kevin A. Miller, “Who Puts the Gideon Bible in Your Hotel Room?” *Christianity Today*, July 1, 1991, at <https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/issues/issue-31/bonus-section-who-put-gideon-bible-in-your-hotel-room.html>, accessed July 3, 2021.

also distributed to hospitals, military personnel and schools (court rulings in many states eventually ended distribution to most schools). Fewer hotels now provide Gideon Bibles, due to the use of technology and the varied religious beliefs of hotel customers. Even though they are known primarily for the distribution of Bibles, Gideons also seek to help Christian businessmen improve in their ability to witness to Christ

Gideons International membership is open to Christian businessmen and professional men age 21 and older who are members in good standing of a church and have the recommendation of their pastor; Gideons' wives may join the Auxiliary organization. Members may not be involved in the sale or manufacture of alcoholic beverages.⁵ With headquarters in Nashville, Tennessee, Gideons meet in local groups called camps and work with Protestant and evangelical churches to finance their work of Bible distribution.

Another ministry of the Gideons is the distribution of the free *Life Book* to students.⁶ The *Life Book* includes a brief summary of Old Testament history, the complete Gospel of Mark (with marginal comments), an invitation for the reader to answer Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?" and a selection of Bible verses on various Christian life topics.

Texts:

The Life Book (2017)

Beliefs and Practices:

According to their website, Gideons believe that the Bible is "the inspired, infallible, inerrant Word of God" and that "the Lord Jesus Christ is the eternal Son of God."⁷ Gideons believe that true salvation "is available only through the grace of God."⁸ All members of the Gideons must receive Jesus as their personal Savior, try to follow Him in their daily lives and be members of good standing in a Protestant or evangelical church.

The Gideons International is not a denomination, but an association that seeks funding for Bible distribution from evangelical and Protestant churches (Gideon Bibles, the King James Version or English Standard Version, do not include the apocryphal books found in Roman Catholic versions of the Bible). Gideons come from many denominations, but all share a desire to see the lost come to Christ. The Gideons state that they "act as an extended missionary arm of the church."⁹ Gideons believe that Bible distribution "plants powerful seeds God can use according to His own timing."¹⁰

While the Gideons are zealous in their desire to witness for Christ, the statement of faith on their website does not include a detailed statement about Jesus' saving work on the cross or the

⁵ Miller, at <https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/issues/issue-31/bonus-section-who-put-gideon-bible-in-your-hotel-room.html>, accessed July 3, 2021.

⁶ *The Life Book*, <https://thelifebook.com/>, accessed July 10, 2021.

⁷ The Gideons International, <https://gideons.org/faq>, accessed July 5, 2021.

⁸ The Gideons International, <https://gideons.org/about>, accessed July 10, 2021.

⁹ The Gideons International, <https://gideons.org/faq>, accessed July 8, 2021.

¹⁰ The Gideons International, <https://www.gideons.org/about>, accessed July 5, 2021.

forgiveness of sins. The *Life Book* for teens states that Jesus is the “Son of God who lived a sinless life and died to pay for my sin.” Readers learn that they are “under the curse, condemned to hell without Jesus” (John 3:18).¹¹ The *Life Book* encourages readers to make a decision to follow Jesus Christ: “You don’t have to clean up your life first. If God has opened your eyes to see your sin and His love for you, He is waiting with open arms for you. Run to Him now. Wherever you are and whatever you’re doing, surrender your life to Him now.”¹² Those who follow Christ are encouraged to read the Bible and seek fellowship with fellow believers in a local church.

A Lutheran Response

The Gideons are rightly zealous in their witness for Christ and their eagerness to distribute God’s Word so that people read the Scriptures. However, it is important to remember and acknowledge that it is the Holy Spirit who convicts people of sin and leads them to repentance. The Spirit enlightens hearts through the Gospel. It is not an individual’s “personal decision” that leads to the confession of Jesus’ lordship; it is the Spirit’s work within that person: “No one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except in the Holy Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12:3).

Although the Gideons encourage new believers to join a local Christian congregation, there is no mention on the Gideon website of Baptism and Holy Communion or of the importance of these means, or channels, of God’s grace. Through the earthly elements (the water of Baptism and the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper) of these Means of Grace, “the triune God delivers His gifts of forgiveness of sins, life and salvation. These Means of Grace are not simply information presented for our consideration, but are God’s Word doing what it says and actually giving and delivering to us what it promises.”¹³ According to the Lutheran Confessions, “the Father does not intend to draw us apart from means. Instead, he has preordained his Word and sacraments as the regular means and instruments for drawing people to himself.”¹⁴

The Gideons do not follow practices often found in lodges, such as rituals, oaths or access to hidden knowledge, but The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod believes that agreement in doctrine and practice is a Scriptural requirement for church bodies to share the Lord’s Supper, exchange pulpits or engage in joint worship. For this reason, joint worship with members of the Gideons is an area of concern. An evaluation done in 1962 by the Commission on Organizations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod states: “From the materials quoted [from the constitution of Gideons International] it is evident that a member of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod who joins the society would affiliate with a unionistic organization since it does not recognize any denominational lines for membership.”¹⁵ Another evaluation, by the LCMS

¹¹ <https://thelifebook.com/read/>, accessed July 10, 2021.

¹² <https://thelifebook.com/read/>, accessed July 10, 2021.

¹³ *Luther’s Small Catechism with Explanation* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 281.

¹⁴ Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article XI, *The Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 652.76

¹⁵ Evaluation of The Gideons International, 1962, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, Commission on Organizations.

Commission on Fraternal Organizations, notes that “Lutheran congregations sometimes permit members of the Gideons to tell their story following a church service or in meetings of the congregation. Contributions may be made directly to the ‘Scripture Fund’ solely for distribution of Bibles, without further involvement in the organization.”¹⁶

An answer on the Frequently Asked Questions page of the LCMS website states: “The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod has taken no official position regarding the Gideons. In evaluating the Gideons, the Synod's Commission on Theology and Church Relations has not found the objectionable features of fraternal brotherhoods (lodges) present in the Gideons. Judgment as to whether to invite Gideons International representatives to give presentations in or at the end of LCMS worship services (which is fairly common) is a matter left to the judgment of individual pastors and the local congregation. There should be no objection to LCMS members supporting the Bible distribution program of the Gideons.”¹⁷ If and when a congregation does permit a presentation by Gideons International in connection with a worship service, it is urged that it be kept as distinct as possible from the service itself, so as to prevent the impression that the speaker is participating in the service. Likewise, the Gideons speaker should be encouraged beforehand to limit his remarks to explanation of the organization and its work and to avoid preaching or teaching in his capacity as a guest presenter.

Links and Websites

The Gideons International
<https://gideons.org/>

The Life Book
<https://thelifebook.com/>

¹⁶ Philip Lochaas, Executive Secretary, Commission on Fraternal Organizations, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. The work formerly assigned to the Commission on Fraternal Organizations and the Commission on Organizations is now done by the LCMS Commission on Theology and Church Relations.

¹⁷ <https://www.lcms.org/about/beliefs/faqs/lcms-views#gideons>, accessed July 12, 2021.