

# THE GIDEONS

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On August 51 1971, Dr. W. R. Davenport, president of the Gideons International gave Richard Nixon a Bible. The book represented the one hundred millionth Script-Lire distributed by the Gideons on a worldwide basis since 1908 when twenty-five Bibles were placed in a hotel in Superior, Montana. On April 25, 1972, 3473 Korean soldiers were baptized. It is estimated that 95 percent of these men were prompted to do so only after contact with Bibles distributed by the Gideons. A Lutheran minister in Sioux Falls points to a beat up Gideon Bible he received when he went into the service. He claims that Bible led him to the Savior and eventually the ministry.

The Gideons International, or the Gideons as they are commonly known, are only one of fifty Bible societies in the world today. Perhaps the best known is the American Bible Society. In one year alone the American Bible Society puts out one hundred million portions of Scripture. In 1970 one of their men gave President Nixon a Bible that represented the one billionth portion of Scripture they had printed. There are other smaller Bible societies such as the Pocket Testament League. But as far as the free distribution of Bibles, the most extensive domestic and foreign program belongs to the Gideons International with headquarters in Nashville, Tennessee.

Evidence of Gideon work is easily seen. When you walk into a motel room in Minnesota the chances are two to one that there will be a King James version of the Bible on the night stand with enlettered imprint that reads, "Placed by the Gideons." On hospital calls perhaps you've noticed a similar Bible on the dresser in the room. You may have heard of the little black pocket testaments the Gideons pass out at the induction centers of the armed forces. Or perhaps your son or daughter came home from the public school with little red Bibles they said two well dressed men passed out at an assembly. This is all the work of the Gideons.

No doubt some of you have had closer contact with the Gideons. The phone rang and a man identified himself as a Gideon. He requested permission to have ten to thirty minutes to address your people Sunday morning on the work and mission of the Gideons. He also asked that he be allowed to receive an offering after the service. He guaranteed that all the money would be used for the distribution of Bibles in the King James edition. Or perhaps a dedicated businessman in your congregation mentioned to you that he had been approached by a group of men called the Gideons who wanted him to join their organization and meet with them for their Saturday morning prayer meeting. This again is evidence of the work of the Gideons.

Who are the Gideons? Briefly, they are about 39,000 Christian businessmen from Protestant or evangelical churches. 17,000 of their wives make up the Gideon Auxiliary. They come from the United States, Canada and ninety-four other countries throughout the world. Their stated purpose is to win souls for the Lord Jesus Christ. They do this in three ways. First, they encourage fellowship among Christian businessmen. Secondly, they witness personally. Thirdly, they distribute Bibles. They further describe themselves as the "non-sectarian- mission arm of the church, sowing the precious seed, the Word of God, in the world while being supported by 1000's of churches of all evangelical denominations by prayers and contributions."

This afternoon we'll take a brief look at the Gideons. First a brief history of the Gideons. Then individual membership in the Gideons. Next, the program of the Gideons and finally some practical considerations.

One evening in September of 1898 Mr. John Nicholson entered the Central Hotel in Boscobel, Wisconsin, a town between Madison and Prairie du Chien. The hotel was filled so he had to share a room with a man named Samuel Hill. As a thirteen year old boy Nicholson had promised his dying mother he would read the Bible and pray daily. When Nicholson was ready to go to sleep that night he took out a Bible and said to his roommate, "Brother, I make it a habit to read a passage of Scripture and talk to my Lord before going to sleep each night." Hill replied, "I am a Christian also; let us make our devotions together." They got talking and considered if some organization could not be started for the mutual help and recognition of Christian travelers.

Joined by a third man, W. J. Knights, they sent out letters to other traveling Christian businessmen announcing an organizational meeting. Only the original three showed up for the meeting in Janesville, Wisconsin, but they organized anyway. Puzzled over a name for the group the men bowed their heads in prayer and determined that the one who first received a name from the Lord should speak it out. Knights, after a few moments said, "Gideons." Together they read Judges chapter six and seven and adopted the name "Gideons The Christian Commercial Traveling Men's Association." At their first business meeting in Waukesha, Wisconsin, the emblem of a white pitcher with a red flame on a blue background was adopted.

In June of 1900 six hundred members met in convention. Growth that first year was extremely rapid. They resolved that every hotel which the Gideons patronized should furnish a Bible at the front desk. The convention sermon that year was based on Luke 10, the story of the Good Samaritan. In the same way the man on the road to Jericho was attacked the traveling Christian businessman of 1900 was subject to attack by the three highwaymen of intoxicating liquor, gambling and the brazen sirens of the street. The Gideons were compared to the Good Samaritan who bound up the wounds and gave the traveler care and renewed his strength.

For the first ten years the Gideons grew quickly numbering 7100 by 1908. However, they seemed to be little more than a club that met in convention once a year. A resolution in 1908 set the men to action. The Gideons resolved to place a Bible in every room in the hotel in the United States. The first request for Bibles came from Superior, Montana. A hotel in Detroit came with a second request for one hundred and fifty one Bibles. In that first year of Bible distribution 6000 Scriptures were placed in hotels from Georgia to Texas to Montana. By 1920 membership had dropped off to 3900 but one half million Bibles had been distributed.

Their consequent history indicates a progressive program. In 1937 they resolved to place a Bible on the desk of every teacher in the United States and Canada. Eight months before Pearl Harbor 50,000 New Testaments had been given to servicemen. 1941 marked the beginning of the distribution of white testaments to nurses. In 1946 the Gideons started to give Bibles to students in the fifth through twelfth grades. Bedside Bibles in hospitals were first made available in 1950. To date the Gideons have distributed 110 million Bibles or portions of Scripture in 96 countries. What started with thee men at a Wisconsin hotel in 1898 now has 55,000 men and women in its program.

What are the requirements for the individual Gideon? The occupational requirements are that he be either a businessman, a businessman-farmer, a professional man or individual associated with institutional work. He must exercise business judgment and employ or supervise at least two other people. A barber who has only one man working for him is not eligible for membership while a barber who has two men working for him is. Clergymen are refused membership as well as those dealing with the sale of alcoholic beverages or men engaged in a business inconsistent with Christian standards. Typical examples of Gideons are a construction boss from St. Paul in his sixties who first was introduced to the Gideons in Butte, Montana forty

years ago. Another St. Paul Gideon is an attorney with the Internal Revenue Service for twenty-five years. The state chaplain of the Gideons is a member of the South Minneapolis camp. He is in his early forties and works as an investor for IDS.

There are also spiritual requirements. Applicants for membership must answer yes to the following questions: Do you believe the Bible to be the inspired Word of God? Do you believe the Lord Jesus Christ is the eternal Son of God? Have you received Him as your personal Savior? Do you endeavor to follow Him in your daily life? Are you a member of a church? Members must come from Protestant churches. No one can be a member of the Gideons who is from a sect which recognizes written works of human authors as inspired in the same sense as the Bible. For this reason, Roman Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, Christian Scientists, Seventh Day Adventists and Unitarians are refused membership. Dues or the membership fee is \$15 a year. A fee of \$400 will make you a lifetime member and exempt from all future dues.

A Gideon is not a member of a local organization but a member of the international group. He attaches himself to a local unit called a camp.

The camp is the basic work unit of the Gideons. A camp must have at least six members but there is no ceiling as far as number. The Minneapolis South camp is a large group with forty-nine men on its roster, but the average camp numbers between twenty and thirty men. There are 863 Minnesota Gideons distributed among forty camps. There are six camps in the Twin Cities and camps in Mankato, Alexandria, Brainerd, Sleepy Eye and just about any other population center. Throughout the world the 1971-72 totals showed 37,500 members in 2002 camps. Gideon camps are found in such countries as Barbados, Trinidad, Mozambique, Zambia, Hong Kong and Vietnam. Eight foreign zones and the domestic state groups form the skeleton of the international organization.

The local camp elects its own officers and conducts its own business. There are certain key figures in each camp. The relative activity or inactivity of a camp rests on the chairman. The camp chaplain is responsible for the spiritual growth of the camp. He emphasizes Bible reading, Bible memorization, and prayer. The camp Bible secretary is in charge of ordering, receiving, placing and caring for Bible and testaments. He surveys the needs of an area and keeps track of all the placements. Another key figure is the church assignment secretary. He arranges for church services and other opportunities for the Gideons to tell the story of the Gideon ministry. He takes care of all the offerings received and is responsible for promotion and publicity in general.

An active camp gets together for a prayer meeting every Saturday morning. The St. Paul South camp meets at the North Pole Restaurant on highway 61 in Newport. The chairman is a Lutheran, the chaplain has Pentecostal leanings and the Bible secretary has background in a covenant church. The chairman opened the meeting by announcing the Bible reading for the day. Everyone pulled out a Bible or pocket testament, each man reading a verse until the text was finished. No comments were made on any of the verses. Then fifteen minutes were spent with prayer requests. The chairman noted that on the Gideon Prayer Calendar for that day prayers were to be addressed on behalf of the members in Canada and for all members of the Gideons to spend more time in the reading and memorizing of Scripture. One man mentioned that the next day was Easter and suggested a prayer for those who only saw the inside of a church once a year. Another man said he was having trouble in Hastings. He had been promised the opportunity to distribute Scriptures in some of the public schools but now the administrators had a change of heart. He asked that a prayer be offered that these men reverse their decision. When all the

requests were in the chairman turned to the man on his left and asked him to start. They worked their way around the table until everyone had a chance. Individual prayers lasted between two and five minutes. Throughout the twenty-five minute prayer there was the chant in the background of "Praise Jesus" and "hallelujah" from the pentecostal chaplain. The man who started wrapped things up. That ended the meeting. Some of the men left while others ordered their breakfast.

For the most part any business is incidental to the prayer meeting. That is handled at the monthly meetings or campfires. These are dinner meetings with the wives or auxiliary. They are usually held Saturday nights. They open with song and a devotion usually by the camp chaplain. After dinner the committees report. The Bible Secretary will mention the number of Bibles placed during the month. The Assignment Secretary will indicate the number of churches contacted during the month and perhaps the offerings. A speaker or slides on some aspect of the work will be the main presentation for the night. At the closing the whole camp forms a circle and sings "Blessed be the Ties that Bind." State and international conventions are held annually. This year they will be at Duluth and Houston, Texas.

Where do the Gideons get the money to print and distribute what currently amount to one million Bibles every forty days? Where do they get the money to place 1000's of Bibles in motels at the cost of \$1.43 each? Where do they get the money to go into high schools and distribute hundreds of testaments at the cost of forty-five cents each? Where do they get the money to give nurses white testaments at the cost of seventy-five cents each?

First, there are the annual dues of \$15 per person. Of that \$3 is sent back to the state organization for promotional purpose. Another \$1.50 of the dues covers the subscription to the monthly Gideon magazine each member receives. The balance, \$10.50, goes to the international fund. This is used largely for maintaining the business office in Nashville which has thirty-two employees. Administration expenses account for 15% of a total budget of \$ 7million

Another source of revenue is called the Memorial Bible Program. First used in Canada it is coming into its own in the United States. People drawing up wills are encouraged to remember the Gideons. For example, a gift of \$50,000 was received from a furniture manufacturer in Michigan.

But the main source of funds is the church offerings. Taking their key from Acts 15:4 where Paul and Barnabas go to Jerusalem and there "declared all things that God had done with them" the Gideons feel this gives them Scriptural basis to report in all churches how their work is going. The first step in getting into the churches is to organize or present a rally or banquet to which all the local pastors are invited and acquainted with the Gideon program. After the rally the church assignment secretary contacts the pastors and arranges for a time when a Gideon can come into the church and present the Gideon message.

What is the presentation? When a Gideon comes in he may have five minutes or the whole service. Usually he starts out by quoting Isaiah 55:11, "Thy Word shall not return unto me void." He would then give a personal testimony about the time he came to faith. After quoting Acts 15:4 he would briefly describe the Gideons, their purpose and programs. Each Gideon on such an assignment carries a small brief case with editions of each Bible or testament the Gideons pass out. In each case the specific edition is held up, an appropriate passage quoted and then a story or return as they call them is told of how a Gideon motel Bible, hospital Bible, nurse's testament, serviceman's testament or youth testament led a person to his Savior.

For example: The Gideon would quote Hebrews 4:12, "For the Word of God is quick and powerful and sharper than any- two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of the

joints and marrow.” This passage would apply to the black serviceman ‘s testament which he would hold up. Then he would tell you about Tommy Conkel who grew up in Circleville, Ohio. Tommy was inducted into the service in May of 1968. At that time he received a black serviceman’s testament. He was sent to Vietnam and killed in December of 1963. Tommy’s widowed mother was grief stricken and to add to this traumatic experience was the realization that while her son had attended church there was no assurance of his salvation. The burden was almost too much. But two weeks later she received Tommy’s personal belongings. These included his Gideon Bible. On the last page there was a commitment form he had signed showing he had received the Lord Jesus Christ as his personal Savior on October 23<sup>rd</sup>, two months before his death. His mother now had the peace she had not known before.

Such an example would be attached to the serviceman’s testament. Corresponding examples would be attached to the other editions as to how an individual was saved by a motel Bible or student testament. The Gideon would conclude the presentation with the question, “How can you help?” You can pray. You can join the Gideons. Then he would quote Proverbs 3:27, “Withhold not good from them to whom it is due when it is in the power of thy hand to do it.” Another testimony would close the presentation and a plate or door collection would be taken. Church offerings account for \$3 million of the \$7 million budget. In the St. Paul North camp presentations were made in 137 of 151 Protestant churches and offerings of over \$10,000 were received in one year.

All funds collected from the churches are sent to the International Organization at Nashville. The contributor is assured that his gift will go to the purchase of Bibles. Each camp establishes an account at Nashville. For instance, the St. Paul North camp had its \$10,000 in offerings credited to its account. When they ordered 16,000 student testaments this was charged to their account. But at the end of the year, whether the camp’s scripture fund is in the red or the black it reverts to \$300. In this way the international organization can supply Bibles to areas where the need for distribution is great but the church income is limited. For instance, the Gideons in our state last year raised about \$20,000 more than they raised in Bible distribution. At the end of the year that \$20,000 surplus from the individual Minnesota camps went to purchase Bibles for Brazil, Vietnam or Korea where the needs are great but the income limited.

As mentioned the objective of the Gideons is to win people for the Lord Jesus Christ. Their first means listed to accomplish this goal is the association of Christian businessmen. The second means is personal testimony. To put a measure on how much personal witnessing the Gideons do is not possible. One indication, though, is the number of personal worker’s testaments distributed. On his own a Gideon will purchase a number of pocket testaments to give to the people he witnesses to. 163,000 of these were ordered during the 1971-72 fiscal year. This means the average Gideon gave away six or seven copies of Scripture at his own expense.

The third and most obvious method of fulfilling their objective is the Gideon Bible placement program. The first step for the camp is to survey the area. About every two years an active camp goes over the hotels and motels in its region to see if new Bibles are needed or old Gideon Bibles are worn out. The life expectancy of a Gideon Bible in a hotel room is seven years. The Gideon contacts the motel or hotel and makes arrangements to place them in the rooms. Usually he is cordially received and even given a passkey in some places. For the motel owner having a portion of Scripture in the room is good business because people might be less inclined to run off with a towel or ashtray if there’s an open Bible sitting next to it.

Another area of Bible placement is the local induction center. A businessman from the Minneapolis South camp occasionally takes time during the day to go to the center and give the

men black serviceman's testaments. Some trouble took place during the days of the anti-war protests. Demonstrators felt that if Gideons, who were civilians, could set up shop in the center and distribute printed material they should have the right to do the same. Eventually the administration just asked everyone to leave. After a year's absence the Gideons approached the center again and were allowed to continue their work.

A growing area of Bible distribution are the school systems. At one time only the King James Version was used. This had definite advantages when it came to copyright laws. Recently they are printing and using the Berkley Version. This enables Gideons to get into Roman Catholic schools which previously said no to the King James but now are receptive to the Berkley. The goal of the St. Paul North camp was to distribute 16,000 student testaments by April. Occasionally the Gideons are admitted to public schools although lately they have received a cold shoulder in the St. Paul and Hastings systems. Once in a while there are rumblings and they get some negative feedback from groups like the American Civil Liberties Union to stay out or keep religion out of the schools.

Hospitals are another area of Gideon work. The men take care of the room copies while the women or auxiliary supply the white testaments to nurses and nursing students. This past year the auxiliary gave out 250,000 testaments. This is the main area of activity for the auxiliary.

Members of the auxiliary must be wives of the Gideons. They go back to 1901 when Mrs. Till and Mrs. Nicholson, wives of the founders, took an active interest in the work. They organized in 1928 and started distributions in 1942. Total membership today numbers around 17,000 in 40 countries plus the United States and Canada. Their personal offerings for the work called the "Mite Fund," reminds one of the LWMS mission boxes.

Foreign distribution is handled by 9300 Gideons in 94 countries. Ten Gideons in Seoul, Korea, journeyed 150 miles to the demilitarized zone between North and South Korea to distribute 14,000 Scriptures to the South Korean army. In 1972 South Korean Gideons placed close to one million Scriptures. Claims are that in the last two years 140,000 soldiers have been converted to Christianity largely through the work of the Gideons. Gideons in Danang and Saigon pass out Bibles even in Communist detention centers and have records of 197 decisions for Christ..

Bible distribution is the main means by which the Gideons hope to lead people to the Savior. With 10 million Scriptures a year being given away this means the average Gideon or member of the auxiliary places about 200.

That is briefly--the organization, purpose and program of the Gideons. Now a few practical considerations.

One thinks of the methods the Gideons use. With a somewhat planned but still pretty random distribution a person wonders how many of those Bibles don't end up in the rubbish. The American Bible Society charges, if only a token, because it feels when a man wants something and pays for it he will hold on to it a lot longer. One also thinks of the Ethiopian in Acts 8. He had Scripture. He was reading from Isaiah. But when Philip asked if he understood what He was reading he replied how could he when there was no one to explain it to him. At the point where a Gideon would be asked to explain a certain portion of the Bible it would depend on what denomination he was. The Gideons also somewhat contradict their doctrinal deemphasis when they advocate personal evangelism and present a guideline called "How to be a Soul Winner." This book was written specifically for the Gideons in 1959 by a man named C.S. Lovett. This is an evangelism methods book filled with the subjective emphasis of reformed theology. The book states that to be an evangelist one must be filled with the Holy Spirit. The goal of the

presentation is to get the person to make his decision to accept Christ. One chapter is called "How to Press for a Decision." No mention is made of the sacraments. Hell is soft pedaled. The witness of different Gideons will not be the same. One will tell you to get your children baptized and another to skip it. Questions directed at Scripture would not be answered in a consistent way by Gideons..

Another question is their presence in the public schools. We would not be found complaining if Bibles are given. But what would be your reaction if the Jehovah's Witnesses were extended the same privilege or junior came home with the Book of Mormon?

Can our people belong to the Gideons? Our people can answer the membership questions in the affirmative. They could answer yes to "Do you believe in the Bible as the inspired Word of God? Do you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as the eternal Son of God? Do you endeavor to follow him in your daily life? Are you a member of a church?" Understood correctly they could answer yes to "Have you received Jesus as your personal Savior?" However, questions like that hint at subjective theology. Another thing objectionable would be the discouragement of any denominational talk and the middle of the road position that pleases everyone and offends no one in contrast to the Lord's command to continue in His Word. But the strongest argument against one of our people participating is the joint worship and prayer that is part of their program on the local camp, state or international level. One cannot sit next to a person and address joint prayers when one is praying to the God of Scripture and the other is praying who doesn't believe in infant Baptism or the Lord's Supper. For our people to belong and participate in the Gideon program would necessitate a violation of Scriptural fellowship principles.

Can our churches participate or support the Gideons? Could we have their speakers come into our churches and present the Gideon message as part of the service or say a few words after the service? Can we encourage our people to give "a couple dollars to this worthy religious organization? The dollars given are guaranteed to purchase a Bible. Whether the money goes for Bibles or not the presence and support of the Gideons is the encouragement and support of a religious organization that condones unionistic practises.

Can we make use of their materials? A vacation Bible school was in its second week. The teacher wanted to get a Bible in the home of each student. The Gideons were considered. Would this be proper? To a certain extent this question is answered for us. The Gideons Will not just send you a load of 50 or 100 Bibles for you to use or distribute. Their procedure is that a Gideon hand the Bible to each individual. The Gideons are not just a source of free Bibles but you must be willing to have a Gideon come in and pass them out. Again, their presence would be acknowledging their program. It would also be somewhat inconsistent to refuse them the privilege to talk to the congregation and then turn around and ask for their help.

In conclusion we must really admire the work of the Gideons. By their efforts God's Word is distributed in places it might never reach in conventional ministries. We can be assured according to Isaiah 55:11, the passage they quote so often, that the Word will not return void but it will prosper. The Holy Spirit will work through that Word whether it is read in a motel room or preached in one of our churches. The Gideons themselves are as sincere a group of men as you will ever find.

But there are certain aspects of their work and program that put up a stop sign in front of us.

Their deemphasis of denominational differences, their practice and encouragement of joint worship and joint prayer are inconsistent with the fellowship principles laid down in the

some Bible they distribute. We therefore must deny them our personal and congregational support.