APA citation format for this article:
Rodríguez-Moreno, N., Casas-Ramírez, J.-A., Olaya-Arenas, A., & Mayor-Tamayo, J. F. (2025). Bible reading practices by four Christian-inspired collectives in the context of social protests in Colombia (2019–2021). *Perseitas, 13*, 454-488. https://doi.org/10.21501/23461780.5113

BIBLE READING PRACTICES BY FOUR CHRISTIAN-INSPIRED COLLECTIVES IN THE CONTEXT OF SOCIAL PROTESTS IN COLOMBIA (2019–2021)[a]

Prácticas de lectura bíblica por parte de cuatro colectivos de inspiración cristiana en el marco de las manifestaciones sociales en Colombia (2019-2021)

Research Article

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21501/23461780.5113

Received: November 25, 2024. Accepted: April 28, 2025. Published: September 24, 2025

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Abstract

In the context of the social protests that took place in Colombia between 2019 and 2021, this article examines whether specific modes of reading the Bible can influence individuals' sociopolitical engagement and, if so, whether the interpretive approaches to the biblical text employed by the Christian-inspired communities and collectives participating in this study had any impact on their decision to engage in various forms of social protest across the country. To address this question, fieldwork was conducted using a qualitative research design, drawing on focus group techniques and data analysis informed by grounded theory. The findings indicate that participation in the protests was not initially framed as the result of prior consensus regarding particular ways of analyzing social reality or engaging in communal Bible reading from a defined interpretive perspective. Nevertheless, the collectives acknowledged that their historical trajectories and communal practices—shaped by contextual and liberationist approaches to biblical texts—played a significant role in fostering both individual and collective forms of engagement.

Keywords

Bible; Colombia; Base Ecclesial Communities; Social Protests; Social Uprising; Politics; Religion; Liberation Theology.

Resumen

En el marco de las manifestaciones sociales que tuvieron lugar en Colombia del 2019 al 2021, el artículo indaga si determinadas formas de lectura de la Biblia pueden influir en el compromiso sociopolítico de las personas y, en tal caso, si las estrategias de acercamiento al texto bíblico que han realizado las comunidades y colectivos de inspiración cristiana que hicieron parte de esta investigación tuvieron algún influjo en su opción por participar de las diferentes formas de protesta social registradas en el país. Para responder a esta cuestión, se desarrolló una investigación de campo que asumió un enfoque cualitativo en que se recurrió a la técnica de grupos focales y al análisis de la información mediado por la teoría fundamentada. Como hallazgos, se pudo establecer que la opción por participar en las protestas no se hizo, en principio, como expresión de consensos previos para analizar la realidad y leer comunitariamente la Biblia con algún enfoque en particular. No obstante, los colectivos reconocieron que fueron su trayectoria histórica y sus dinámicas comunitarias en torno a aproximaciones contextuales y liberacionistas de los textos bíblicos las que estimularon estas respuestas individuales y colectivas.

Palabras clave

Biblia; Colombia; Comunidades Eclesiales de Base; Estallido social; Manifestaciones sociales; Política; Religión; Teología de la liberación.

Introduction

Between 2019 and 2021, amid the lockdown measures imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic, Colombia witnessed one of the most significant and highly visible social phenomena in its recent history. This period was marked by a series of social protests[1] that began with the National Strike in November 2019 and reached their peak with the social uprising starting on April 28, 2021 (Celis, 2023, p. 16; Medina, 2023, p. 42). These mobilizations expressed opposition to proposed pension, labor, and tax reforms, as well as to other issues such as:

> bombings targeting civilian populations... attempts to privatize state-owned enterprises...; the increase in killings of social leaders, human rights defenders, and former FARC combatants; demands for the fulfillment of agreements reached with students and Indigenous communities; the defense of the accords signed in Havana; and opposition to corruption. (Archila & García, 2023, p. 74)

These dynamics were compounded by the social, economic, and mental health challenges that emerged or intensified during the public health emergency and as a result of the measures implemented by the national government to address it, including preventive lockdowns. These measures contributed to an increase in both monetary poverty and extreme monetary poverty (Acosta-Sierra & Corrales-Caro, 2022). In addition to their "broad geographic scope, massive social participation, prolonged duration, and unprecedented radicalism" (Archila & García, 2023, p. 77), a distinctive feature of these protests was their capacity to mobilize and articulate population groups from diverse backgrounds, orientations, and sectors—beyond those traditionally involved in protest movements. These included labor unions, students, teachers, Indigenous groups, environmental activists, artistic collectives, truck drivers, taxi drivers, informal miners, soccer fans, feminist and LGBTIQ+ collectives, unemployed individuals, single mothers heading households, among others (Educapaz et al., 2023).

[1] This study uses the terms social demonstrations, social protest, and citizen mobilization synonymously, understanding them collectively as "a participatory process of collective action aimed at promoting, contributing to, and advancing alternative and critical proposals to the dominant model of society, oriented toward greater social justice. This process assumes that transformation occurs through occupation of and presence in public spaces in order to denounce, advocate, educate, and raise awareness about such alternatives" (Mosaiko, n.d., p. 5). Asylum Dictionary – Social Mobilization. Government entities, such as the District Secretariat of Government of the Mayor's Office of Bogotá, adopt a similar equivalence.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21501/23461780.5113

The body of literature and documentation produced around this phenomenon—and its short- and medium-term political, social, and economic impacts—is extensive. However, studies examining the influence of religious factors in these processes of social agency, as well as the role of faith-based commitments in motivating individuals and collectives to participate in protest, remain limited. To begin addressing this gap, the research project underlying this article asked whether particular modes of reading the Bible can influence individuals' sociopolitical engagement and, if so, whether the interpretive approaches to the biblical text adopted by the Christian-inspired communities and collectives involved in this study had any impact on their decision to participate in the various forms of social protest that took place in Colombia between 2019 and 2021.

To address these questions, the article proceeds as follows. First, it presents the methodological framework of the study, including its theoretical foundations, data collection and analysis techniques, the participating focus groups, the criteria used for their selection, and the ethical protocols followed throughout the research process. Second, drawing on the narratives generated in the focus group sessions, it offers a characterization of the participating ecclesial communities and Christian-inspired collectives, their origins, and their core commitments. Third, it describes the context of the social protests from the perspective, lived experience, and subsequent reflection of these communities.

Within these narratives, particular attention is given to experiences of victimization, stigmatization, and violence, as well as to acts of resistance and efforts to rebuild the social fabric. Fourth, the article outlines the concrete modes of participation (actions and repertoires) through which these collectives engaged in the protests, along with the motivations underlying their involvement. Finally, it examines the extent to which biblical reading practices influenced the participation of these communities and collectives in the social protests.

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Methodological Framework of the study

The study adopted a qualitative research approach. From this perspective, and as outlined by Bonilla-García and López-Suárez (2016), the focus was on examining the phenomenon under study within the contexts in which individuals operate, with the aim of interpreting reality based on the meanings attributed to it by the participants. Grounded theory (Bénard et al., 2010) was employed as the theoretical framework for data analysis, as it enabled the integration of researchers—interested in understanding the phenomenon—with the actions and meanings constructed by the participants (Bonilla-García & López-Suárez, 2016). It also allowed for careful consideration of both the contributions provided by participants and the scientific treatment of data by the researchers (Lúquez-Camacho & Fernández-Celayarán, 2016).

Accordingly, this analytical methodology facilitated engagement with ecclesial communities and collectives, their biblical reading practices, and the meanings and implications these practices carry—particularly in the realm of sociopolitical engagement within the context of the social protests that took place in Colombia between 2019 and 2021. The methodological process was informed by both the reformulated and constructivist strands of grounded theory. From the perspective of the reformulated school, symbolic interactionism was incorporated, enabling the method's application across multiple disciplines within the social sciences. From the constructivist paradigm, the study sought to move beyond positivist frameworks, thereby emphasizing the researcher's subjectivity and the specificities of the social reality under examination (Bonilla-García & López-Suárez, 2016).

The methodological process began with the prior construction of a theoretical and conceptual framework that informed the analysis of the data. This theoretical foundation centered on understanding social protests—their historical causes, the movements and social actors involved, their specific repertoires, as well as their scope, achievements, and impacts—and on biblical reading practices among certain churches and members of Christian communities, including their interpretive subjects, the religious worldviews

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21501/23461780.5113

that inform them, their hermeneutical assumptions, and their ethical-political commitments. This approach enabled a deeper critical understanding of both phenomena and the ways in which they intersect (Olaya Arenas & Rodríquez Moreno, 2025).

This process did not entail any loss of rigor in the constant comparative analysis of data during collection, coding, and analysis, which were conducted simultaneously while maintaining epistemological vigilance to prevent deviations toward common-sense interpretations and biases that could compromise the scientific rigor required (Pérez, 2010). Throughout the process, new analytical categories emerged, such as contextual conditions of practice (adverse, challenging, and supportive), the influence of biblical reading on participation in protests, and the specific practices of each collective (social engagement–spiritual practice).

The data collection technique employed was the focus group. This method was selected based on the researchers' interest in analyzing how individuals and the collectives to which they belong construct shared imaginaries around a given phenomenon through interaction (Hernández Sampieri et al., 2014). In this case, the study explored how participants perceive their ecclesial or social experiences, their biblical reading practices, and the extent to which these practices influenced collective participation in the social protests that took place between 2019 and 2021.

Four collectives were selected: two Christian-inspired social organizations and two base ecclesial communities. The two organizations are located in Bogotá (central Colombia), while the communities are based in Cali and Popayán (western Colombia). A total of four focus group sessions were conducted—one with each organization or community—each lasting between one and three hours. On average, each collective included eight participants in the focus group sessions. These sessions were carried out during the first semester of 2023.

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Regarding the selection criteria for the focus groups, three main considerations were applied. First, the groups had to be located in cities where the highest levels of social unrest were reported during the protests. Second, it was essential that they were either base Christian communities or socially engaged organizations inspired by Christian principles, whose lines of action were consistent with their commitments to human development and a preferential option for the poor, including initiatives of political engagement and peaceful, symbolic participation in social mobilization. Third, the selection also considered the proximity of these groups to the academic institutions with which the researchers are affiliated.

Following the focus group sessions, the audio recordings were transcribed, and the resulting transcripts were subsequently analyzed using ATLAS.ti software, version 22. The selection of this software was based on its strong alignment with grounded theory, as it enables the circular integration of data for qualitative analysis. It also facilitates the identification of codes requiring saturation through its functionality for linking quotations to codes and displaying the number of quotations associated with each code. This, in turn, supports the process of achieving content saturation for each code/category, in accordance with grounded theory (San Martín-Cantero, 2014). This approach made it possible to develop an understanding of the phenomenon from the perspectives and interpretations of the members of the collectives.

It is important to note that, throughout the entire research process, appropriate ethical protocols for working with individuals and human groups[2] were strictly followed. The validation of the *focus group guide* instrument was carried out with the specialized support of two social workers and one theologian, who reviewed the document, suggested revisions, and approved it for implementation. The instrument was then shared with the participating collectives so they could review it and raise any questions or concerns.

[2] These include Resolution 008430 of 1993 issued by the Colombian Ministry of Health and Social Protection, as well as the validation of the research through completion of the Responsible Conduct in Research, Innovation, and Creation Form (FCRIIC) of Pontificia Universidad Javeriana.

Likewise, the informed consent form was presented and explained to each of the focus group participants prior to its completion and signature. It should also be noted that the content of this article was shared with and validated by the participating collectives, who expressed their agreement with how their perspectives and contributions were represented.

Characterization of the Christian-Inspired Collectives Participating in the Study

The ecclesial and social collectives that participated in this study include the *El Pilón Base Ecclesial Community (BEC)* in Cali (Valle del Cauca Department); the *Fredy Mosquera BEC* in Popayán (Cauca Department); the *Norman Pérez Bello Claretian Corporation*; and the *Gender and Diversity Group of the Casitas Bíblicas Corporation*, both located in Bogotá, Capital District. These collectives can be characterized and defined based on the conditions that gave rise to them, the forms of praxis they engage in, and the biblical reading methodologies they have developed over time.

Although these experiences are situated in different contexts and their institutional missions do not necessarily converge in identical strategies of engagement, the surrounding social realities they confront are analogous in terms of injustice, exclusion, and violence. These very conditions have enabled them to integrate the triad *life–Bible–liberation*, ultimately generating a coherent articulation that functions as a dynamic and guiding axis for their outward engagement.

While each collective has a distinct nature (religious, social, or civil), they share a common driving force: the social conditions they have collectively perceived and experienced at particular moments—whether social injustice, state persecution resulting from their defense of communities, or social rejection based on sexual identity. Regardless of the specific trigger, and in contrast to the ways in which other groups use the Bible as a tool for legitimizing or perpetuating conservative frameworks (Pizzi, 2022, p. 481), these collectives

report having found in the Bible—and in their liberation-oriented readings of it—the inspiration to interpret their particular realities (at times extending to the national level) and to commit to both ecclesial and social causes, thereby integrating life and Scripture. Indeed, the Fredy Mosquera BEC in Popayán traces its origins to the context of liberation theology:

> It was around the 1970s and 1980s when the influence of liberation theology from Brazil arrived, right? You can correct me if I'm wrong. Different groups began to organize, including Christian groups and others. They would meet in municipalities here in Cauca, and participation was always strong. (Fredy Mosquera BEC, Experiences Category, Entry 7)

Similarly, the *El Pilón BEC* in Cali traces its origins to the work of Franciscan priests who arrived in the capital of Valle del Cauca in the 1980s, specifically in the Aguablanca District. Inspired by the principles of the Second Vatican Council, the Latin American Episcopal Conferences (particularly Medellín), and liberation theology, these priests committed themselves to accompanying impoverished populations living in marginalized and peripheral urban areas. This was the case of the El Pilón BEC, established in 1988, "by the Franciscans in Marroquín, with the first religious members, Sister Alba Estela, a novice, and several companions who began there with considerable momentum" (El Pilón BEC, Experiences Category, Entry 23).

A similar account is provided by the *Norman Pérez Bello Claretian Corporation* in Bogotá. This experience is rooted in the figure of a local catechist who, inspired by the evangelizing and social work of the Claretian missionaries, became known for his significant grassroots social engagement. This catechist was later assassinated by state agents as part of a broader persecution of BECs and their social advocacy. One of its members recounts:

> We were born as an organization within the pastoral practices of the Claretian missionary community. That is where we originated, for several reasons. The first is historical: in the mid-1990s—actually, the early 1990s—pastoral practices and discourses had a very strong liberating political content. I think this was happening in many sectors of the Church. It was also a kind of renewed wave of liberation theology and its expressions. (Norman Pérez Bello Claretian Corporation, Experiences Category, Entry 14)

For its part, the experience of the *Casitas Bíblicas Corporation* in Bogotá, along with its Gender and Diversity Group, also emerges within an ecclesial environment. Although the group's primary purpose is rooted in religious praxis, the space in which it originated and operates is shaped by a liberation-oriented reading of the Bible. Indeed, it is precisely this liberationist interpretive framework that enabled—following internal tensions—the emergence of a group whose aim is to create a safe space for sexually diverse youth. As one participant explains: This was a vision we developed with Leíto. Leo told me it was something Casitas Bíblicas owed—to create a group for human diversity, building on processes from previous years. *(Gender and Diversity Group, Casitas Bíblicas Corporation, Experiences Category, Entry 1).* In this way, a clear need was identified; what remained was for a Christian organization to open its doors and embrace diversity:

> Casitas [Bíblicas] has existed for 30 years, but from that time until this facility was built—11 years ago—there was also a major internal struggle. It involved moving beyond being a movement of five or seven families that were already well established. They operated within liberation theology, which was linked to the Catholic Church. However, we have maintained autonomy from the parish and go beyond simply serving it. Yet these families had never confronted the issue of sexual diversity. (Gender and Diversity Group, Casitas Bíblicas Corporation, Experiences Category, Entry 5)

Indeed, the lived realities of these groups and communities have served as a primary source of inspiration for both their emergence and their praxis within broader social contexts. This inspiration has been shaped by the social and holistic well-being dimensions perceived in the narratives of the Gospel. The foundational force driving their engagement toward transformation—beginning with their immediate realities and extending to concrete commitments within their broader social environments—is the communal reading of the Bible through a liberationist lens. While not all groups or collectives are required to have an ecclesial identity to adopt the Bible as an interpretive framework, an attentive engagement with social reality remains essential. When illuminated by the biblical text, such engagement enables a more comprehensive understanding of that reality. This, in turn, demands a disruptive and provocative mode of reading—one that moves beyond the linearity of orthodoxy and leads toward an ethically and politically grounded orthopraxis.

This praxis has transformed these collectives into spaces of resistance, memory, and healing, benefiting not only their own members but also external individuals and groups who have been victims of injustice and state persecution. As sites of memory in which a spirituality of resistance emerges, these communities have been able to process and heal their own wounds—such as, for example, the assassination of Norman Pérez Bello for the organization that bears his name. Following his death:

> Six months later, a human rights committee was formed, also within the framework of Claretian pastoral work. It was called the Norman Pérez Bello Human Rights Committee. We were not created primarily to demand justice for the event itself—that's part of our paradox. We were created in his memory, yes, but more so to support human rights processes led by the Intercongregational Commission for Justice and Peace of the Colombian Conference of Religious. (Norman Pérez Bello Claretian Corporation, Experiences Category, Entry 15)

Building on this experience, the corporation has supported various communities nationwide in matters related to human rights advocacy and political participation. At the same time, it has been involved in processes of recovery and resilience among victims of state violence, adopting a mystical and symbolic perspective, as illustrated in the case of the killing of the young protester Dilan Cruz, whose death on November 25, 2019, was caused by the Mobile Anti-Riot Squad of the National Police (ESMAD) (Prada-Uribe & González-Zapata, 2022): We carried out a symbolic act there, placing elements associated with Dilan's name, key words, allowing the family to express their own words—another kind of narrative, a liberating one; biblical, but without the text. (Norman Pérez Bello Claretian Corporation, Practices Category, Entry 25).

A similar dynamic is observed in the origins of the Fredy Mosquera BEC in Popayán. Fredy Mosquera was a catechist and evangelizer in the Cauca region who mobilized impoverished individuals lacking access to housing in the city. One day, he was found dead near the area where he worked with local communities. Nevertheless, his memory and cause endure within the community, serving both as a source of inspiration and healing:

> He was an evangelizer who traveled to rural areas, to the veredas. The base ecclesial community did not emerge all at once. First came evangelization, which developed around the Jesús Obrero parish, where there were Franciscan priests. And the Franciscans work extensively with base ecclesial communities. (Fredy Mosquera BEC, Experiences Category, Entry 7)

Although the El Pilón BEC in Cali and the Gender and Diversity Group of the Casitas Bíblicas Corporation have not experienced violence with the same intensity as the two previous cases, they have also fostered processes of memory and resistance within their respective communities. In doing so, they have drawn on hope as both a theological and social category to confront complex and critical situations, such as those experienced during the social protests. In the case of the El Pilón BEC:

> At that time, the blockade in Cali led to shortages, created many difficulties, and generated widespread fear among people. So I focused mainly on hope and trusting in God that we would overcome the situation, while staying attentive to the needs of the community. Biblical texts from Isaiah, the Psalms, and the Gospels were used to foster critical awareness. (El Pilón BEC, Practices Category, Entry 38)

Within the Casitas Bíblicas Corporation in Bogotá, a particular sensitivity emerged regarding the care of sexually diverse youth, who often felt unsafe in other environments where they were not accepted. One participant explained:

> I wanted to highlight some of the things mentioned about Casitas as a space, and also CEDECO [Community Development Center]. Precisely because, even though these are spaces that identify as grounded in the Bible and in a faith-based perspective, many of us as young people initially hesitate to approach them because of what we know about how the Church has historically viewed our identities and political positions. However, this has not been the case in Casitas and CEDECO. These are positions that strongly affirm social protest, emphasize care—care among bodies—and also function as support networks for us. (Gender and Diversity Group, Casitas Bíblicas Corporation, Practices Category, Entry 5)

Across the collectives, it is recognized that popular readings of the Bible from a liberationist perspective have contributed to the development of a holistic understanding of reality, in which life and its protection become central commitments of these communities—without necessarily implying formal

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21501/23461780.5113

affiliation with an institutional ecclesial structure. The freedom to interpret the biblical text from concrete lived contexts has enabled the defense of life, as evidenced in the various situations experienced during the social protests.

Experience of the Participating Communities in the Social Protests

First, the antecedents of the 2019–2021 social protests are presented as perceived and identified by the participating ecclesial communities and collectives. Second, accounts are provided of the experiences of victimization, stigmatization, and violence, as well as of the acts of resistance and the reconstruction of the social fabric that emerged. Finally, the collectives' reflections on the events and their prospective outlook on possible future scenarios resulting from these protests are discussed.

Regarding the causes and antecedents of the social uprising, the collectives highlight several key factors: the intensification of the armed conflict and the failure to implement the peace agreements; the assassination of social leaders and extrajudicial killings; the reforms introduced by the government of Iván Duque (2018–2022), including tax reform; corruption in the management of public funds; socioeconomic inequality and widening social gaps (Pineda, 2021); the impact of these factors on the protests (OECD Development Centre et al., 2021); and the ways in which these conditions were further exacerbated by the effects of COVID-19 (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean [ECLAC], 2021). One interviewee explained that their participation in the frontline (primera línea) stemmed from the fact that "they were fed up with having nothing; they were caregivers, people who went out to fight for those conditions" (Gender and Diversity Group, Casitas Bíblicas Corporation, Protest Category, Entry 4).

In this context, the presence of the so-called *frontline groups* (*primeras líneas*) during the social protests was characterized by the predominant participation of young people, who were later supported by various social groups, universities, and mothers (Amnesty International, 2021), as well as

by the formation of community kitchens (*ollas comunitarias*) (Observatory for Gender Equity, 2021), in which women played a central role (Observatory of Social Realities, Report No. 3, 2022, pp. 21–24). A significant number of participants came from conditions of exclusion and found in this space an opportunity for recognition and visibility (Observatory of Social Realities, Preliminary Report No. 2, Cali, 2021), as well as a conducive environment for fostering dialogue and ongoing assemblies involving diverse sectors of society (United Nations [UN], Human Rights, 2022).

The majority of participants engaged in peaceful protest; however, there were also instances of looting and vandalism. These incidents were used by state officials and political actors aligned with the ruling government to stigmatize protesters (Restrepo-Sanín, 2022), employing labels such as "thugs" and "terrorists" to refer to them (Alvarado-Alcázar, 2020). According to one interviewee in Bogotá, traditional media outlets also contributed to this stigmatization, which led to the incarceration of a significant number of young people and the broader criminalization of social protest: "Through the label *frontline*, the entire social protest movement was criminalized, applying a logic of punitive deterrence" (Norman Pérez Bello Claretian Corporation, Protest Category, Entry 33).

All of the above had repercussions in the violent manner in which both the national and local governments responded to the protests. Indeed, violence emerged as one of the most prominent elements in the narratives, particularly the violence exercised by state agents—namely the ESMAD and the National Police—against protesters. One young participant recounts: Look, I'm alive, but they stripped me naked and were trying to rape me. They were beating me and mistreating me. I had to hide my phone in my genitals. It was terrible. (Gender and Diversity Group, Casitas Bíblicas Corporation, Protest Category, Entry 4).

Among the acts of violence reported are killings, persecution, torture, and sexual assault carried out by public security forces. The judicialization of young participants in the protests is also highlighted:

> It started with beatings—people first went through torture, being hit, brutally assaulted, and then detained and prosecuted. It was as if there was an intention to eliminate the frontline groups altogether. (Norman Pérez Bello Claretian Corporation, Protest Category, Entry 33).

In response, members of the Cali community reported adopting strategies to counter the criminalization of protest, emphasizing the need to "stay attentive to people... to counter the misinformation coming from the media, and the attacks against the frontline groups" (El Pilón BEC, Protest Category, Entry 36). This was particularly relevant given that, according to these communities, misinformation was largely disseminated through traditional media outlets and certain social media platforms (Pérez-Bonfante & Uribe-Metrio, 2021). As a result, alternative media became an important resource (Cartier-Barrera, 2022).

Additionally, violence from certain sectors of the civilian population was reported, as participants "could hear shots being fired into the air, people coming out with this idea of 'defending private property'" (Gender and Diversity Group, Casitas Bíblicas Corporation, Protest Category, Entry 1). In other words, some civilians engaged in acts of intimidation and violence against those participating in the protests.

The violence described by the communities and collectives has been documented and analyzed in reports and publications by both national and international organizations. These reports describe the violent intervention of public security forces, characterized by the disproportionate use of force, the use of potentially lethal weapons, arbitrary detentions, and cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment. In other cases, incidents of sexual violence and attacks against human rights defenders are reported. Likewise, violations of freedom of expression and press freedom are documented (Melamed & Topel, 2021, pp. 5-9).

Reports from national and international organizations have identified and described human rights violations (S.O.S. Colombia Mission, 2021, pp. 23–38), while the report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UN, 2022) addressed the human rights situation in Colombia, specifically referring to excessive use of force and alleged violations by public security forces (pp. 7–8). The UN High Commissioner's report on the 2021 National Strike (UN, 2022) provides a comprehensive account of the spectrum of human rights violations that occurred between April 28 and July 31, 2021 (pp. 19-48).

However, alongside the acts of violence, it is equally important to highlight the practices of resistance and the reconstruction of the social fabric. Among these, the work of alternative journalists stands out, as they documented events occurring at protest sites, helping to expose human rights violations and protect those at risk. These were largely grassroots journalists who, due to their reporting, faced persecution. Similarly, networks of solidarity were formed to safeguard the integrity of those participating in the protests. Artistic activities, beyond symbolically denouncing repression, became collective spaces of play, care, and utopian imagination of alternative possible worlds. Community kitchens and the sharing of food created opportunities for mutual support and helped address hunger, which had already intensified as a result of the pandemic lockdowns. The civic character and the exercise of citizenship within these processes also emerged as significant. As one interviewee from Bogotá expressed:

> The spaces that emerged from the social uprising—whether in neighborhoods, territories, or universities—became spaces of civic agency. These practices of coming together, of sharing in a community kitchen... what does organizing a community kitchen imply for the exercise of citizenship? I think it expands the notion of community and moves away from individualism, which tends to produce passive forms of citizenship. (Gender and Diversity Group, Casitas Bíblicas Corporation, Protest Category, Entry 6).

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21501/23461780.5113

Within these spaces of civic agency that emerged in the context of the protests, the experience of Popayán offers further insight: "The *cacerolazo (a form of protest involving the banging of pots and pans)* became a strategy that brought together the entire population, and in one way or another, young people came out. I think it was something spontaneous, voluntary—something that was neither imposed nor paid for" (Fredy Mosquera BEC, Protest Category, Entry 20). These *cacerolazos* functioned as a peaceful strategy for collectively constructing meaning and expressing social grievances. This is also reflected in the experience of "the mothers of the frontline," where: Mothers—who historically have often been seen as submissive—intelligently and courageously protected the young people expressing themselves (Fredy Mosquera BEC, Protest Category, Entry 24).

In addition to the provision of food through community kitchens and the protection offered by mothers, other forms of solidarity emerged, such as: Many people opened their homes to young people who were being pursued, offering them shelter. One can say that this, too, is a powerful lesson (Fredy Mosquera BEC, Protest Category, Entry 27). Another form of care and solidarity involved monitoring, protecting, and defending human rights:

> In the Cundinamarca region—around Gachancipá and Tocancipá—volunteers from the Corporation were also present. They engaged in activities related to the protection and restoration of human rights, as well as oversight. In Funza, a human rights team from the Corporation participated in all the mobilizations. (Norman Pérez Bello Claretian Corporation, Protest Category, Entry 30)

Thus, collective organization, the rethinking of citizenship, legitimate demands directed at government policies and reforms, concern for others, and efforts to foster empathy while overcoming individualism and apathy are all elements identified in the narratives of these ecclesial communities and social organizations. Peaceful protest is recognized as an effective means of civic participation and mobilization aimed at transforming concrete social realities, even amid fear generated by stigmatization and the threat of violent repression.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21501/23461780.5113

Regarding the question of what follows after the protests, there is a clear projection toward continuing to "weave collectively" and to defend a dignified life. As expressed by the community in Popayán:

> This opens up the possibility of transforming fear into action. From our identity as base ecclesial communities that love and defend life, new paths emerge. It is a force that has made possible the emergence of an alternative government that seeks change. It has also led many people who previously opposed any form of mobilization to become more informed—to develop awareness of what is happening and how it affects them, or even to recognize that what may affect us only slightly may deeply impact those around us. That empathy, that sensitivity, that humanity—I felt it grow within my context. (Fredy Mosquera BEC, Protest Category, Entry 28)

The collectives agree in their commitment to continue believing in the transformative power of grassroots movements, despite difficulties, fears, and internal tensions. In this regard, Report No. 3 of the *Observatory of Social Realities* (2022), produced by the Archdiocese of Cali, documents experiences centered on community-based organizational initiatives, particularly in the city of Cali, and reflects this shared aspiration among communities and collectives to: "build peace in local territories and weave bonds that, in one way or another, contribute to our task of constructing just, inclusive, and dignified civic agreements" (p. 4).

There also emerged a desire to continue organizing, as the violent response to the protests by the government generated a widespread sense of distrust among civil society. As a result, initiatives began to take shape, such as the idea of "creating a Human Rights laboratory based on all the violations and experiences endured during the uprising, particularly involving young people in this territory" (Casitas Bíblicas Corporation—Gender and Diversity Group, Protest Category, Entry 8). These reflections on the social uprising have led communities to believe in the possibility of transforming the conditions that affect them:

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21501/23461780.5113

> I feel that it was indeed progress and that transformation comes from people, from the community—it does not come from above, but is forged in spaces like community kitchens; it is forged in the streets. And that awareness, I believe, is always part of our identity. (Fredy Mosquera BEC, Protest Category, Entry 28)

Participation of the Collectives and Base Communities in the Social Protests (2019–2021)

Actions and Repertoires Developed During the Social Protests

The participation of the collectives in the social protests was driven by diverse motivations. In some cases, it began with individual participation by members of the community or collective through their workplaces (e.g., labor unions) or places of study (e.g., universities). In other instances, collective mobilization occurred from the outset of the National Strike, with groups participating as organized collectives within the marches. Following the protests of April 28, 2021, participation took on multiple forms: artistic, cultural, and spiritual activities were organized, while attention was also given to health-related support, educational initiatives, and the protection of protesters in response to repression by security forces and the targeting of young participants in the so-called frontline groups (Zibechi et al., 2021, pp. 83–88).

Across the four community experiences, participation was framed by a longstanding ethos of social commitment and solidarity that had been cultivated throughout each collective's historical trajectory. During the protests, these groups developed a range of repertoires that extended beyond simply marching. Among the most significant was their role as support networks, providing financial assistance to young protesters to cover transportation costs, mobile phone plans to maintain communication, and food. They also marched alongside them and offered protection when individuals were pursued by law enforcement, particularly the ESMAD (the Mobile Anti-Riot Squad (ESMAD) of the Colombian National Police).

In this way, they functioned as support networks for care and the defense of human rights, engaging with institutions such as local ombuds offices (personerías) and the United Nations, and even participating as part of the Blue Vests initiative to serve as human rights observers during the protests (Norman Pérez Bello Claretian Corporation, Participation Category, Entries 27–28). Other networks activated in Popayán included the Ecumenical Table for Peace (MEP) and the National Association of Peasant Users of Colombia (ANUC).

Psychosocial support was also provided, as stigmatization, persecution, criminal prosecution, and even killings had traumatic effects on the emotional lives of those accompanied by these groups. This support enabled the formation of collective bonds and networks that were essential for ensuring a minimum level of protection of life, both for members of the communities and collectives and for the broader groups they accompanied—particularly young people from marginalized sectors.

Support also extended to other domains, including the organization of cultural, health-related, and educational activities, as well as vigils and religious celebrations. Artistic and therapeutic activities made it possible to "begin to heal people and build connections... with an Afro-descendant group from the Usme district, engaging with issues of ancestry" (Casitas Bíblicas Corporation—Gender and Diversity Group, Participation Category, Entry 12). Likewise, members of the Norman Pérez Bello Corporation recount:

> A Saturday morning full of cultural activities, attended by a large number of former students from the Claretian school and their families, who are familiar with this kind of engagement... followed by a vigil held at the Bosa Acoustic Shell. (Norman Pérez Bello Claretian Corporation, Participation Category, Entry 33)

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21501/23461780.5113

In the ecclesial community of Popayán, participants describe how their commitment led them to shelter and care for those who had been injured:

> For example, when young people were taken to certain locations, many people had to offer their homes. It was not publicly disclosed where they were staying. We brought them medication, and if they needed gauze because they were injured, health-related collections were also organized. (Fredy Mosquera BEC, Participation Category, Entry 21)

They also recount acts of generosity, such as contributions made by one member from the produce of her own land:

> The idea was to gather sacks of produce and go out to distribute them. "Go deliver this—because it's now or never! Otherwise, what are these things for?" There was no money, but there was cassava, there was fruit. Every week or every two weeks, bread was made and distributed. (Fredy Mosquera BEC, Participation Category, Entry 20)

In Casitas Bíblicas, the concern about how to explain the violence that children were witnessing on a daily basis led to the following reflection:

> How do we transform those discourses of hate, those moments of violence?... So that a child can understand them through artistic means—perhaps through drawings... through words that help the child understand that they, too, can be part of the protest in one way or another. To foster these reflections at home with their parents. (Gender and Diversity Group, Casitas Bíblicas Corporation, Participation Category, Entry 16)

This consideration not only highlights the critical and prophetic dimension that participants sought to convey through protest, but also reveals a concern for raising awareness among younger generations regarding the importance of their agency and leadership in processes of social transformation aimed at promoting human dignity and improving living conditions and well-being. Far from being interpreted as spaces of indoctrination or ideological conditioning, these actions are understood by the collectives as non-formal pedagogical strategies for fostering critical thinking and political participation among children and youth.

Motivations for Participation in the Social Protests

From the outset of the protests, the ecclesial communities and collectives expressed a clear sense of the relevance and legitimacy of both the demonstrations themselves and the demands articulated through them. The question of legitimacy was evident, emerging from the tension between the government's position—which stigmatized social protest—and the claims advanced by protesters, grounded in the constitutional right to protest. The Colombian Constitution establishes that "any segment of the people may assemble and demonstrate publicly and peacefully" (Political Constitution of Colombia, 1991, Article 37).

In the narratives of community and collective members, the legitimacy of the protests is understood as extending beyond a constitutionally guaranteed right, becoming instead a legitimate and peaceful means of collective claim-making in response to the socioeconomic conditions affecting citizens—conditions shaped or exacerbated by government policies.

The aspiration for a different national reality—one in which widespread poverty could be overcome—and the hope of achieving a stable peace in the territories after decades of armed conflict between the state and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia—People's Army (FARC-EP), also constituted key demands of the protesters. These included calls for the implementation of the peace agreements signed in Havana in 2016. These historical and contextual factors were part of the reflections developed by the four groups in their meetings and activities, alongside their recognition of a Christian commitment shaped through communal biblical reading practices.

The experience of participating in the protests allowed these groups to connect with others who were offering forms of solidarity at sites of resistance. These moments were interpreted as unique opportunities to enact principles that had been repeatedly reflected upon in biblical workshops: the defense of human dignity and human rights, hospitality, prophetic critique of all forms

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21501/23461780.5113

of idolatry, the ethical and sociopolitical dimensions of the Gospel, and the preferential option for those who are impoverished, discriminated against, violated, rendered invisible, and socially discarded (Castillo-Durante, 2000).

At the same time, participants acknowledged that, in some cases, greater organizational capacity would have enabled more significant impact in certain contexts. However, this limitation also became a source of learning—particularly regarding the ways in which active forms of militancy can mobilize support networks and foster new forms of collective organization as expressions of human solidarity and sensitivity, oriented toward fraternal and sororal efforts to protect life (Norman Pérez Bello Claretian Corporation, Participation Category, Entries 37–38). The experience also contributed to recognizing processes—some incipient, others more developed—of political and social strengthening, in which the community functions as a social subject and a central agent of mobilization, capable of fostering cultural, political, and economic transformations (Fredy Mosquera BEC, Participation Category, Entry 17).

Among the communities and collectives participating in this study, a common factor influencing the decision to become actively involved in the protests was their reference to a religious or spiritual dimension grounded in Christian inspiration and nourished by communal Bible reading practices. Their actions are described as the result of "deeply evangelical commitments," translated into concrete efforts such as protecting girls who have been victims of sexual violence, Afro-descendant individuals subjected to racial persecution, and young people exposed to violence (Gender and Diversity Group, Casitas Bíblicas Corporation, Participation Category, Entry 6; Norman Pérez Bello Claretian Corporation, Participation Category, Entry 35). Reflections developed within community gatherings have "nurtured Christian commitment, bringing together the different struggles in which each person has been engaged with the Word. That is why no formal invitation was needed—participation was something natural and spontaneous" (Fredy Mosquera BEC, Participation Category, Entry 21).

Influence of Biblical Reading Practices on the Participation of Christian-Inspired Collectives and Communities in Social Protests

As demonstrated in the preceding sections, several members of the collectives participated in the protests spontaneously and in a personal capacity, without prior consultation or agreement with their respective communities or groups. This participation emerged either as a result of the formative and consciousness-raising processes developed throughout their involvement in the collectives, as part of the broader rejection of government policies, or as an expression of empathy and solidarity in response to the repression and violence experienced by protesters. As one member of Casitas Bíblicas explains:

> In my case, it wasn't a biblical text telling me, "you must be empathetic with your neighbor." It was the horror of seeing someone being beaten—someone who could be me. That's when I started connecting analysis with action and asking myself, "what do I do?" It's easy to reflect and feel distressed from the comfort of your home with your phone, but what do we actually do in the face of that suffering and pain? (Gender and Diversity Group, Casitas Bíblicas Corporation, Influence Category, Entry 1)

In contrast, a member of the Popayán community acknowledges that their faith commitment and biblical understanding of God led them to participate in the marches:

> For me, we have to go out—we have to go out because it is a social march. But I can also see the presence of God reflected in the people who marched, because they feel violated and are demanding their rights—and God also desires that, the claiming of rights. (Fredy Mosquera BEC, Influence Category, Entry 7)

Similarly, members of the Norman Pérez Bello Claretian Corporation point out that their prior experience with Popular, Community-Based, and Peasant Bible Reading, grounded in a human rights and territorial defense perspective—combined with literacy initiatives for community councils and training schools for territorial defense—played an inspirational role. This process enabled them to internalize the liberating message of the Gospel, which they describe as

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21501/23461780.5113

something they "carried in their blood when deciding to take an active role in the protests" (Norman Pérez Bello Claretian Corporation, Influence Category, Entry 1).

As the protests unfolded, the collectives also made strategic decisions, such as offering their meeting spaces to protesters—whether or not they belonged to the collective—so they could rest, eat, and protect themselves from police abuse; providing legal support and accompaniment to those who had been detained; organizing community kitchens; disseminating information through social media about events occurring at protest sites that were not being covered by mainstream media; and planning artistic expressions of peaceful resistance and opposition to violence. Some participants later recognized that both the protests and the repertoires they developed bore a distinctly Christian—and even theological—character:

> Even if we don't consciously think in theological terms, what is being built here is theology. What young people created through this uprising and mobilization is theology... theology is how we speak and come together in the growth of the community, how we unite in defending those who are suffering and being impoverished—because that was the thinking of Jesus... this is a theology that emerges from the ground, from lived experience. (Gender and Diversity Group, Casitas Bíblicas Corporation, Influence Category, Entry 2)

Although none of the collectives reported engaging in organized communal Bible reading practices specifically during the protests, participants consistently acknowledged that it was the historical trajectory of their communities and their ongoing engagement with contextual and liberationist approaches to biblical texts that stimulated these spontaneous responses. As one member of the Popayán community stated: "the reading of the Word—that is what shaped the communities" (Fredy Mosquera BEC, Influence Category, Entry 5). Within the same focus group, another participant emphasized:

> We must not overlook that the Bible itself teaches us that we must have political participation. We cannot remain indifferent to these processes. What we must do is maintain critical distance and denounce when these processes benefit only certain groups rather than the broader community. (Fredy Mosquera BEC, Influence Category, Entry 10)

Likewise, participation in the protests was understood as a direct consequence of earlier engagement with prophetic biblical texts: "I approach it from a prophetic perspective: when faced with injustice, we must go out and denounce it... that reading must become embodied in others." (Fredy Mosquera BEC, Influence Category, Entry 8). This reflection prompted another participant to add:

> I was reading about the prophets Amos and Jeremiah and how they confronted the kings, demanding that they defend the rights of the orphan and the widow—those at the very bottom of Israel's social hierarchy, marginalized and excluded. And in a way, I was confronting that same reality here... we are defending the rights of those who are in need. (Fredy Mosquera BEC, Influence Category, Entry 6)

Indeed, during the course of the meetings with representatives of the communities, several participants were able to recall and become aware of the influence that various biblical texts—and the reflections generated around them—had on the collective responses of the organizations, particularly as their members became more visibly involved in the protests. In this regard, members of the Gender and Diversity Group of Casitas Bíblicas indicated that the passage of the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24) was decisive in helping them understand that Jesus was walking alongside those who were marching—many of them burdened by the events unfolding around them. In this sense, Jesus helped them recall what had happened and made their "hearts burn" (Luke 24:32), leading them toward the sharing of bread (Luke 24:30–31), which, in the context of the protests, became tangible through community kitchens (Interview, Casitas Bíblicas Corporation—Gender and Diversity Group, Influence Category, Entries 3 and 4). In their own words:

> They danced the Bible, interpreted the Bible—and as we used to say—"we queered the Bible" in a very particular way. What they emphasized most was that, through that text, they were able to claim their place here and create this space. (Gender and Diversity Group, Casitas Bíblicas Corporation, Influence Category, Entry 3).

For his part, a representative of the El Pilón BEC explains that his critical stance toward reality and his personal commitments are the result of the popular biblical formation developed throughout the history of the community:

> What we were taught through the method of see, judge, and act in reading the Bible leads us precisely to this. In our case, given the conditions of exclusion experienced in the neighborhoods, this method and the Bible help us develop critical consciousness. From the liberation of the people of Israel from the yoke of Egypt and Pharaoh; through the experience of exile in Babylon and the domination of the Persians; later the rule of the Greeks and the struggles of the Maccabees; and all the struggles that Jesus and his companions faced under the Roman Empire—everything one reads reflects the ongoing struggles of the people of God to free themselves from these forms of oppression. And from the prophets, such as Isaiah and Amos, there is a constant denunciation of the injustices experienced by the people of God at the hands of their oppressors. (El Pilón BEC, Influence Category, Entry 11)

It is noteworthy that there is a clear convergence between the biblical themes addressed by these collectives throughout their trajectories—which motivated their participation in the protests—and those identified by authors such as Aguirre (2024) as "recurrent and influential among politically engaged Christians in Latin America" (p. 159). These include the centrality of the historical Jesus, the Kingdom of God, the distinction between political religion and domestic religion characteristic of ancient Mediterranean anthropology, the poor, love, commitment to one's neighbor in need—through whom Christ becomes visible—the understanding of the People of God, the cross, the fatherhood of God, and the humanity of Jesus.

Likewise, it became evident that, although these communities had historically employed the hermeneutical framework structured around the Life–Bible–Life dynamic, during the social protests they maintained the principle of not imposing a predefined thematic framework as a starting point. Instead, they began from the concrete social situations in which they were immersed.

However, unlike the traditional application of this framework, these contexts did not require explicit confrontation with biblical texts in order to subsequently assume transformative commitments and actions.

It appears that, in the specific context of the protests, the biblical foundation had already been internalized through the historical trajectory of the communities. As a result, the impulse to interpret reality and act within it occurred simultaneously, as a response to the commitments already cultivated through prior communal engagement with Scripture.

Conclusions

In seeking to answer whether particular forms of biblical reading can influence individuals' sociopolitical engagement—and, if so, whether the interpretive approaches adopted by the Christian-inspired communities and collectives involved in this study had any impact on their decision to participate in the various forms of social protest in Colombia—the research initially hypothesized that, in response to the emergence of these protests, ecclesial communities and Christian-inspired organizations would follow the classical Latin American pastoral method of see, judge, and act. This would involve, first, gathering (even virtually, due to pandemic-related confinement) to analyze reality; second, selecting a biblical text aligned with the "signs of the times"; and third, deciding collectively to take to the streets in support of the protests (Benavides & Casas-Ramírez, 2022, pp. 46–50).

However, based on the findings derived from the focus group sessions—as demonstrated throughout the preceding sections—this hypothesis had to be reconsidered. It was established that the decision to participate in the protests was not initially the result of formal, consensus-based decisions or prior communal processes of analyzing reality and reading the Bible collectively within the groups. Rather, active participation in the protests—whether individual or collective—emerged as a consequence of long-standing processes

of formation and consciousness-raising developed by these communities over time. Among these processes, the practice of communal Bible reading from a liberationist perspective played a central role.

Consequently, although none of the collectives reported engaging in communal Bible reading practices specifically during or in response to this social context, their members consistently acknowledged that it was the historical trajectory of the collective—and its community dynamics grounded in contextual and liberationist approaches to biblical texts—that initially stimulated the spontaneous responses of their members and subsequently (or simultaneously) enabled the planned and strategic interventions of the collectives. These interventions took the form of concrete repertoires aimed at aligning with popular demands, protecting protesters, and establishing networks of solidarity and resistance. All of this emerged as the matured fruit of the Gospel they had read, studied, critically engaged, and appropriated over the years.

Author Contributions

This article is the result of a collaborative, inter-institutional research project initiated in 2022, titled "Bible Reading Practices by Four Christian-Inspired Collectives in the Context of Social Protests in Colombia from 2019 to 2021." The project involved Juan-Alberto Casas-Ramírez (Principal Investigator, Pontificia Universidad Javeriana), Alejandro Olaya-Arenas (Principal Investigator, Fundación Universitaria Católica Lumen Gentium), Jhon-Fredy Mayor-Tamayo (Principal Investigator, Corporación Universitaria Minuto de Dios), and Norida Rodríguez-Moreno (Co-Investigator, Fundación Universitaria Católica Lumen Gentium). Fieldwork was conducted jointly by all four researchers. The systematization, coding, and reporting of the data using ATLAS.ti software were carried out by Norida Rodríguez-Moreno. Data analysis and the drafting

of the first version of the article were conducted collaboratively by all four researchers. The initial review was carried out by Juan-Alberto Casas-Ramírez. All four researchers contributed to the final version of the manuscript, while final revisions and adjustments were undertaken by Juan-Alberto Casas-Ramírez and Alejandro Olaya-Arenas.

Acknowledgments

The authors express their sincere gratitude to the leaders and members of the El Pilón BEC, the Fredy Mosquera BEC, the Norman Pérez Bello Claretian Corporation, and the Gender and Diversity Group of the Casitas Bíblicas Corporation for their willingness to participate as focus groups in this research.

They also extend their thanks to theologian Viviana Carolina Forero Angulo and social workers Diego Fernando Alarcón Flórez and Lina Fernanda Gutiérrez Ríos, from Fundación Universitaria Católica Lumen Gentium, for their support in validating the instruments used in the development of the focus groups.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest with any institution or organization of any kind. Likewise, Universidad Católica Luis Amigó assumes no responsibility for the management of copyright by the authors in their articles; therefore, the accuracy and completeness of citations and references are the sole responsibility of the authors.

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