

## READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

# *Lincoln's Bishop*

by

Gustav Niebuhr

1. Gustav Niebuhr writes, “That an individual Christian might act as if the requirements of the faith trump racial and cultural divisions is a difficult task, but not an impossible one” (p. xiii). Why is it sometimes challenging to bridge racial and cultural divisions? In your opinion, what other powerful forces trump racial and cultural divisions?
2. In 1952, Niebuhr’s uncle, an Episcopal priest and professor of theology at a divinity school in Tennessee, resigned from his post because the school refused to desegregate (p. xiii). Think of a time when you or someone you know stood up for some belief in the face of opposition. What was the motivation? What was the outcome?

3. Henry Whipple's mother, Elizabeth, taught him to "take the side of the injured and oppressed" (p. 5). What does it mean to support the interests of those who are injured and oppressed? How might this play out in everyday life?
4. In his autobiography, Whipple writes, "In my native town there was an old man who had been captured by the Indians when a child and had lived many years with them. I delighted in listening to his stories of Indian life, and insensibly my heart was touched and prepared for the love which I was to feel for this poor people" (p. 7). How do you think hearing stories during childhood about Indians set the course for his actions as an adult? Has there ever been a time in your life when empathy led to action? Explain.
5. The old man's story about being captured by Indians deeply affected Whipple. "At their best, good stories have the power to uplift and educate. They can shape the moral imagination" (p. 8). Can good stories change the way we think about others and the world around us? Give an example of a good story you have heard or told.
6. Many people were responsible for Whipple's personal development—Peter Doxtater, John Johnson, and his mother, just to name a few (p. 13). What people have had a positive impact on your life? How has each person contributed to who you are today?
7. After four Indians from the Dakota tribe attacked white settlers in Minnesota, many settlers were

shocked by a violence that seemed sudden and unprovoked. Although Whipple felt appalled by attacks on unarmed farm families, he declared that the Indians' aggression stemmed from years of mistreatment by federal agents and local traders (p. 25). Do you think empathy for others can deter or stop violence? If so, how? If not, why?

8. Although the tensions between the Dakotas and white settlers continued to worsen, Whipple's diary ranges well beyond his anxieties or troubled thoughts. Instead, Whipple writes about the "pleasure of tasks at hand" (p. 31) and the beauty of nature. Why do you think this is? Does having a positive outlook help change the negative situations we find ourselves in?
9. In his travels, Little Crow became "familiar with the vastness of the white population and the power of its technology" (pp. 41–42), which gave him an insight into white people that others of his tribe did not have. How does travel inform our view of the world? Has meeting different types of people and seeing different places changed the way you behave or think?
10. Niebuhr states, "As the first to fall, Lynd symbolized how complicated the Dakota War would be: never a simple case of one easily defined side against another" (p. 44). Do you think that the right or wrong side in wars is usually ambiguous? How do sides get blurred? Can you think of other examples? Why do you think this happens?

11. The year before Whipple met President Lincoln, he thought the president was not a strong leader, even writing, “The newly elected President [is] seemingly lost to all sense of his responsibilities” (p. 54). But in the months leading up to their meeting, Whipple gradually changed his opinion, calling him a man “of considerable humane depth” (p. 57). Do you think public figures are judged more harshly than others for what they say? Have you ever been wrong in your opinions about another person? Explain.
12. In the 1850s, some Dakotas began to accept the culture of white settlers and even “took up agriculture, dressed like white farmers, and . . . converted to Christianity” (p. 77). Traditionalist Indians were made uncomfortable by these changes in some members of their tribe and derogatorily called them “cut-hairs” (p. 78). When an individual decides to leave his or her community, are there repercussions? Have you ever been displaced from your community and forced to move to another? What happened?
13. Before the Dakotas agreed to give their land to the government in exchange for an annuity, some Dakotas questioned the statements of the white men who directed the treaty talks. One chief even staged “an abortive walkout on the talks” (p. 80). Do you think it is important to question what others say? Have you ever been in a situation where you did not question what you were told and later regretted it? What was the situation? Explain.

14. After the Dakotas attacked white settlers, many whites came to believe rumors that the violence had been incited by Southern agents who wanted to open a new front in the Civil War: “Terrifying rumors took root—among military men and civilians alike—that the Dakotas were party to a political agenda, in which their goal was not simply to kill whites but, specifically, Northern whites” (p. 89). How do rumors cause problems? Have you witnessed a situation get out of control due to the spread of incorrect information?
15. While many whites felt a burning outrage toward the Dakotas as a people, Whipple stood alone in persistently asking others to see a bigger picture—that the Indians as a whole had suffered abuse by the government and so deserved some measure of empathy. In other words, the Dakotas could not be painted with a broad, exclusively negative brush (p. 94). Have you ever differed from the majority? What was the issue? Did you tell others how you felt? What risks, if any, did you run in speaking out?
16. “Whipple, in his early reports on the war, expressed thanks that few, if any, of the Dakotas he knew well around the Lower Sioux Agency seemed to have taken part in the killing. That indicated to him that the religious teachings he brought to the frontier had forged a bond—of Christian to Christian—stronger than the chasms of history, culture, and race” (pp. 111–12). What are your thoughts about this? Have you ever formed faith-based bonds regardless of cultural and

racial backgrounds? Have you seen faith bring cultures and races together?

17. Henry Whipple understood that the Dakotas could not be treated as a “monolithic presence . . . [because] there were simply too many individual exceptions to make that stereotype work” (p. 112). Why is it easy to have misperceptions about a group of people? Can these perceptions be changed? How? Conversely, have you ever belonged to a group where you didn't fit the stereotype? Explain.
18. Niebuhr writes, “Whipple's efforts leading up to his sit-down meeting with Lincoln in the White House reveal the determination of a man not to be put off or disappointed, despite his being ignored and even insultingly rebuffed” (p. 119). What can we learn from Whipple's persistence? Does being persistent always yield good results? Why or why not? Have you ever had to make multiple attempts to achieve a goal? Explain.
19. Written communication was the main form of correspondence during Whipple's time. If someone's writing was unclear, readers might misunderstand the writer's point, leading to disastrous consequences, but Niebuhr states that “Whipple could write with a concise boldness” (p. 122). Why was concise, bold writing particularly important during Whipple's time? Do you think it is still important?
20. How did Whipple get other bishops to speak out against the brutality toward Indians (p. 139)? Have you

ever rallied people together for a cause? What was the result? Are there lessons to be learned from Whipple?

21. Many terrible stories surfaced about the Dakotas' brutality toward white settlers. "The senator took the atrocity stories seriously, even if he did not publicly clamor for the Dakotas' execution, as Pope and Ramsey were doing. Still, his opinion showed how lonely Whipple's position was" (p. 153). Have you ever held a "lonely" position? Were you able to convince people to join you? Why or why not? How can we better support leaders who are in similar situations and making difficult decisions?
22. Niebuhr states, "So, Whipple asked Minnesotans to search their consciences. In 'The Duty of Citizens,' he reached beyond the call for reform to request a singularly difficult task in a time of such outrage: moral introspection" (p. 160). What makes "moral introspection" a difficult task? When have you been prompted to look inward? Did you find it challenging?
23. Both Whipple and President Lincoln, searching for larger answers to the atrocities of war, looked toward faith for comfort. However, neither man could find a satisfactory faith-based answer to the troubling reality of war. In response to the philosophical question of why wars exist, they landed on "God was unknowable" (p. 169). Have you ever turned toward your own beliefs for answers during troubling times? Were you able to find a reason for the difficulties you experienced, or did the reason for these difficulties remain mysterious?

24. Unlike Whipple and President Lincoln, some people were unable to allow war to remain a spiritual mystery. Niebuhr writes, "Some of the American Board-affiliated missionaries came to see the conversions as products of God's decision to use warfare and confinement to transform the Dakotas spiritually" (p. 173). Why do you think it is so important for some people to find a reason for troubling events in life? Why do you think some people would accept disconcerting reasons for war rather than let the answer remain a mystery?
25. Niebuhr is a proponent of Whipple, even though he states: "[Whipple] is a focus of controversy in academic circles . . . where the figure of a missionary bishop is regarded with suspicion as someone whose attitudes fall short of a religiously pluralistic ideal. Whipple saw the Indians' future as an integrationist would" (p. 184). Why do you think Whipple remains a controversial figure?
26. Niebuhr concludes *Lincoln's Bishop* with a question: "As regards actions like the one in which [Whipple] had participated, the Talmud states that whoever saves one life, it is as if he has saved the whole world. Of how many of us can such a thing be said?" (p. 185). In your opinion, does this statement describe Whipple? How would it benefit us to live our lives with this philosophy in mind?