

Congregational Study Guide

An American Conscience
The Reinhold Niebuhr Story
A film by Martin Doblmeier

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This study guide is prepared for people in congregations who have watched the Journey Films production: An American Conscience: The Reinhold Niebuhr Story. If you are facilitating the discussion, consider reading through the discussion prompts and choosing up to five to use with your group.

1. Take an informal poll:

How many of your group were familiar with Reinhold Niebuhr before viewing the documentary? What did you know about Niebuhr? What was your primary impression of him and his work before viewing the film?

2. Columnist David Brooks notes that Billy Graham, Abraham Heschel, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Paul Tillich were public theologians. They had wide influence well beyond their own circles. Brooks says, *“These big figures were public theologians and now we basically don’t have them anymore.”*

Do you agree?

Do we have public theologians, and if so, who are they nowadays?

3. Niebuhr arrived at Union Theological Seminary without a doctorate. This was a point of contention.

What credentials does one need to have in order to hold certain positions?

What credentials does one need to have for their words to have credibility as part of public discourse?

4. Filmmaker Martin Doblmeier has titled the film *An American Conscience*.

What ideas come to mind when thinking of the "conscience" of a nation?

Does a theologian have any role speaking publicly and often critically about the political and social issues facing the country? Or should that moral perspective only be heard from the church pulpit?

5. Throughout his life Niebuhr engaged in public conversation about worker’s rights, the nature of power, civil rights, the use of military force, interfaith relationships and much more.

In this time and this place, what subjects are most needing serious public conversation?

6. One aspect of Niebuhr's ethics is individuals are more apt to act with love toward neighbor than groups. It is more difficult for groups to transcend sin. This is a primary theme in *Moral Man and Immoral Society*:

Individual [people] may be moral in the sense that they are able to consider interests other than their own but all these achievements are more difficult if not impossible for human societies in social groups...in every human group there is less reason to guide and to check impulse, less capacity for self transcendence, less ability to comprehend the needs of others and therefore more unrestrained egoism than the individuals, who compose the group, reveal in their personal relationships.

How is this true or not true in your own experience?

How does this quote function in light of how your congregation practices (or doesn't practice) confession of sin during worship?

7. The popular singer-songwriter Sting has a song titled *All This Time*. You might want to listen to it before considering this question: <https://tinyurl.com/zjgwv6t>

The song is about the death of a man who worked his whole life in the shipyards. Priests come to visit his bedside. The narrator of the song, referring to the shipyard workers, sings, "Men go crazy in congregations, they only get better one by one." Consider this quote alongside the challenge of workers serving automobile lines in the early 1900's.

Do you agree with this resigned point of view?

After watching the Niebuhr movie, what do you think he would say?

8. Stanley Hauerwas, is the Gilbert T. Rowe Professor Emeritus of Divinity and Law at Duke Divinity School. He was named America's best theologian in 2001 by *Time* magazine. In the film he describes Niebuhr's point of view, which differs significantly from his own. For Hauerwas, the teachings of Christ are in tension with the structures of the world. The church, therefore, is a sign of hope over and against society that embodies an alternative way of being. Niebuhr, by contrast, makes less of a distinction between the realities of culture and the realities of the church.

Which view does your congregation's historic roots more closely align?

How do you know this?

9. Dietrich Bonhoeffer experienced one of America's greatest theological schools: Union Theological Seminary. And he described the teachings there as thin.

What marks rich, robust theological thinking for you?

How does deep theological reflection take root in a congregation and not be left exclusively to theological schools?

10. Your congregation is hosting an event where you have the opportunity to bring in a theologian to teach and preach.

What subject would you want addressed? Is the focus more on individual issues or public issues? Who might you invite?

11. Some might say that if religion gets too close to the halls of power it gets co-opted. That is; it loses what is unique, it loses its voice. For example, if a person of faith is placed on a community council, the reality is that he or she must give up some of his or her values in order to work in and with the system. Jesus is quoted as saying, “*See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves*” (Matthew 10:16).

What dangers are there in a congregation when congregational members are active in politics? What positive benefit might occur?

12. One of Niebuhr's books is titled *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*. It contains a series of reflections regarding his time as pastor at Bethel Evangelical Church in Detroit. During his time at the church, attendance grew significantly. He writes:

“I must admit that I have urged people to come to church myself as a matter of duty. But I can do so no longer. The church service is not an end in itself. Not even religion is an end in itself. If the church service does not attract people by the comfort and challenge it brings them, we only postpone the evil day if we compel attendance by appealing to their sense of duty. It may be wrong to appeal to their sense of loyalty to the institution and tell them that if they have identified with the institution as members they owe it to the strangers to be there. But even that is dangerous. The church is already too much an end itself.”

What is the “end” or ultimate goal of the church? What role does society play in your definition of ultimate aim of the church?

13. Andrew Finstuen says the following in the film:

“So Americans are dizzy, dizzy with opportunity. And they are dizzy with sadness with what has come to pass the last few years. And as a consequence you have people searching for answers; searching for meaning in the church has become an area that booms by the 1950s. It is the highest it has ever been in the United States. Both before and since.”

We are not experiencing a church attendance boom (though there are exceptions). What would have to happen in our society for our houses of worship to see an increase in church attendance?

14. As a pastor in Detroit, Niebuhr was chair of the Mayor's Race Relations Committee in Detroit. One of the persons interviewed in the documentary was the Rev. William Hudnut, Presbyterian minister and former Mayor of Indianapolis.

**To what extent should a clergy person be active in community organizations?
What are the risks? What are the rewards?**

15. Cornel West, speaking of Niebuhr, notes that varieties of liberal theology downplay the tragic dimensions of the human condition. He summarizes Niebuhr's thought by stating that "*The best we can do as human beings is generate democratic possibilities. Democracy is a proximate solution to insoluble problems.*"

**Has your congregation taken on an insoluble problem?
If so, what has been the proximate outcome?
Would your experience confirm that some challenges are unsolvable?**

16. Healan Gaston is featured in the film. She is a Lecturer on American Religious History at Harvard Divinity School. She has noted that Niebuhr's religious worldview made room for equal parts faith and reason.

**How are the dynamics between faith and reason expressed in your faith community?
How do faith and reason come into tension?
How do they support one another?**

17. In the film, Andrew Young observes that "Dr. King reminded people that Reinhold Niebuhr has reminded us that groups tend to be more immoral than individuals," and that Niebuhr's teachings keep us from "being naïve about the evil structures in society."

Do you think the local congregation has any real agency when it comes to taking on evil structures in society? What does the evidence of history say?

18. Consider the **Serenity Prayer** attributed to Niebuhr -- this prayer is frequently used in twelve-step groups.

*God give us grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed,
courage to change the things that should be changed, and the wisdom to
distinguish the one from the other.*

**Does your church host a twelve-step group?
What do you know about the group (not about individuals in the group, that is confidential)? What do you make of the reality that this prayer is more often used in twelve-step groups than in congregations?**

19. In late 2016 the singer songwriter Ani DiFranco was photographed holding a sign with the words originally attributed to Civil Rights icon Angela Davis:

*I am no longer accepting the things I cannot change.
I am changing the things I cannot accept.*

What Bible passages reflect this sentiment?

What passages push against this sentiment? How might Niebuhr respond?

20. At certain moments during the American Civil Rights movement Niebuhr was reticent to speak about sweeping structural change and advocated for measured change.

Are there circumstances where realism works against the aims of God? If so, how? Does your congregation have a way to talk through and discern its involvement and pace of involvement regarding certain community issues?

21. The film closes with a passage from Niebuhr's *Irony of American History*:

"Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we must be saved by love. No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as it is from our standpoint. Therefore we must be saved by the final form of love which is forgiveness."

Set this quote alongside the legacy of your congregation.

What do you learn by this juxtaposition?

Now, set this quote alongside the legacy of your life. What feelings emerge?

22. **What community ministry does your congregation participate in?**

Would you say that your congregation is trying to change the *structure* of something in society through this engagement, or is it focused instead on trying to meet a direct need? From the film, do you think that Niebuhr would argue one is more important than the other?

23. In *Claiming Theology in the Pulpit* by Burton Cooper and John McClure, the two authors have developed a profile of a congregation's relationship with the world. It is not unlike H. Richard Niebuhr's typology of the relationship between Christ and culture. Cooper and McClure identify these categories:

The church against the world: two separate opposing worlds

The church with the world: highest values of the church are in line with the highest values of the world.

The church above the world: church represents the highest values qualifying the world's lower order of values.

The church and world in paradox: church and world in conflict but church participates in

secular world to keep back sin.

The church as transformer of the world: there is ongoing tension but ultimately the church calls the world toward deeper transformation

Do the liturgy, preaching and education of your congregation lift one of these stances above the other? If so, which one? And what are the signs that this is true? Or does your congregation's worship and teaching represent a variety of stances?

24. Niebuhr asked Rabbi Abraham Heschel to deliver the eulogy at his funeral.

Why was this such an important gesture on Niebuhr's part?

Who do you want to deliver the eulogy at your funeral?

What do you hope they might say?

References and for Further Reading

Brooks, David. *The Road to Character*. New York: Random House, 2015.

Brooks tells the story of several historical figures demonstrating their strengths and virtues. A book that a congregation could study to explore character and the role of exemplars in our history and culture.

Cooper, Burton Z., and John S. McClure. *Claiming Theology in the Pulpit*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003.

A pastor could use this book to discern the theological worldviews present in the public expressions of the congregation. Once identified, the pastor is then empowered to make intentional choices so that there is a closer relationship between public representations of faith and practice.

Finstuen, Andrew S. *Original Sin and Everyday Protestants: The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr, Billy Graham, and Paul Tillich in an Age of Anxiety*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2014.

A highly readable survey of three public theologians. An adult education class could use this book to explore how sin has historically been talked about in culture and the implications for such language today.

Gaston, K. Healan. "A Bad Kind of Magic: The Niebuhr Brothers on Utilitarian Christianity and the Defense of Democracy." *Harvard Theological Review* 107, no. 01 (2014): 1-30. doi:10.1017/s0017816014000042.

An incisive scholarly article about a crisis point in our country's history. How far should our country go in making democracy our primary export?

Hauerwas, Stanley. *Hannah's Child: A Theologian's Memoir*. Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 2010.

This is the most personal of Hauerwas' books. Hauerwas represents a different theological worldview from Reinhold Niebuhr. But like Niebuhr, he has at times taken a public role.

Heschel, Abraham Joshua, and Susannah Heschel. *Abraham Joshua Heschel: Essential Writings*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011.

Heschel was one of Niebuhr's best friends. Their religious tenets were different. One more practical. One more mystical. Yet, both were very engaged in the world. This book is an excellent introduction to Heschel's writings.

Lovin, Robin W. *Reinhold Niebuhr*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007.

Lovin writes and teaches about Niebuhr. This accessible book could be used as a primer on Niebuhr's theology for a congregation study group wanting to continue the conversation.

Niebuhr, Reinhold, and Andrew J. Bacevich. *The Irony of American History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008.

A classic from Niebuhr. The word "irony" has been overused. What Niebuhr means by irony is that the United States has become a powerful country without necessarily seeking to become powerful. And the stronger the United States gets the more problematic our power becomes.

Niebuhr, Reinhold, and Cornel West. *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics*. 2nd ed. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013.

A book referred to during the Journey Film documentary. The foreword by Cornel West is an outstanding introduction to Niebuhr's life and thought.

Niebuhr, Reinhold. *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990.

The chapters are short. The thoughts are deep. A wonderful book for a clergy peer group or a congregation board. How times have changed. Or perhaps not.

Niebuhr, Reinhold. *Major Works on Religion and Politics*. Edited by Elisabeth Sifton. New York, NY: Library of America, 2015.

This volume includes the most important works by Reinhold Niebuhr, edited by his daughter.

Sabella, Jeremy L. *American Conscience: The Reinhold Niebuhr Story*. Grand Rapids: W B Eerdsman 2017.

A book prepared to be a companion to the Journey Films documentary. A clear and engaging introduction to Niebuhr and his times, it is particularly useful for those who want to delve more deeply into the Niebuhr story after watching the film.

Sifton, Elisabeth. *The Serenity Prayer: Faith and Politics in times of Peace and War*. New York: Norton, 2005.

The Serenity Prayer has been an important prayer for so many people. This book provides the context for the development of the prayer.

West, Cornel. *Race Matters*. New York: Vintage Books, 1994.

Before *Tears We Cannot Stop* by Michael Eric Dyson and *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates (both outstanding), there was Cornel West's *Race Matters*. What would it be like for a black congregation and a white congregation to read this together and then have a conversation?