

THE BIRTH OF A NATION

Discussion Guide

Introduction

The Birth of a Nation tells the story of Nat Turner, a literate slave in Southampton County, Virginia. Taught to read by one of his owners, Nat became a locally renowned preacher with a gift for reciting scripture. As he traveled throughout the county preaching a message of faithful submission to his fellow slaves, he was exposed to the increasingly brutal treatment of those slaves, which caused him to mount a rebellion to free himself and other slaves from their white owners in August 1831.

The histories of the United States and the African American experience in it cannot be told without acknowledging the role of religion in both. The founding of this nation carried great, complex religious overtones as Puritan settlers saw this new land as a “city on a hill,” recalling Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5. At the same time, the nation was built on the backs of slaves, whose owners used scripture to justify this horrific practice. Slave owners frequently referenced scripture that taught slaves to obey their masters, like Ephesians 6:5. On the other hand, abolitionists celebrated God’s delivery of the Israelites out of Egyptian bondage through Moses as told in the book of Exodus and reminded their opponents that, in Christ, there is no longer slave nor free (Galatians 3:28).

Few films capture this religious tension as effectively as *The Birth of a Nation*. Religion and spirituality—whether traditional African or dueling expressions of Christianity—are shot through in virtually every scene of the film. Faith—in both his African ancestors and Judeo-Christian scripture—formed the foundation of and provided the fuel for Nat Turner’s life. The following is a series of discussion topics to help continue or start conversations around this vital film and its religious themes.



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Wisdom for All

Early in the film, we learn that a young Nat Turner can read. This comes as a great surprise to Elizabeth (his owner and teacher) and a frustration to her peers, who view slaves as inferior to whites in every regard. Elizabeth nurtures this gift in Nat, and, soon, he is reading scripture in church and, eventually, preaching to his fellow slaves. Elizabeth ushers Nat into the family library, but when he tries to pick up one of the many books on the shelves, she stops him short, cautioning that they are full of things “his kind wouldn’t understand.” However, she has a very special book just for him, the Bible.

While we don’t know what types of books filled the Turner library, we could reasonably assume they included science and history texts full of information that has almost certainly been re-written as new discoveries replace old certainties. As scripture reminds us, the wisdom of this world is foolishness to God (1 Corinthians 3:19). And to flip that comparison around, the wisdom of God must seem like foolishness to this world.

Unbeknownst to Elizabeth, she gives Nat access to a powerful force, the wisdom of God, and, from it, Nat derives dangerous insight: all are equal in the eyes of God and there will come a time when the first shall be last and the last shall be first (Matthew 20:16).

We have heard it said that knowledge is power. Perhaps this is why knowledge has been policed throughout history, with women and minorities having to fight for equal access to it. While knowledge is important, the Bible is much more vocal about wisdom, which appears to be a greater virtue. We can have all the knowledge in the world, but without the wisdom to use it judiciously and for the good of others, we continue cycles of oppression that marginalize minorities.

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

1. In what ways does the wisdom of God continue to appear foolish to this world?
2. In what ways do you witness the “policing of knowledge” in your communities? How can you work together to improve access to knowledge for all?

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The Radical Threat of Inclusive Christianity

Throughout his life, Nat Turner walked a fine line. His ability to read and recite scripture and his effectiveness as a preacher took him into places that few of his peers could go. He reads scripture in white churches and travels throughout the county to other plantations to preach to the slaves laboring there. The promises of deliverance that he recites fall deaf on ignorant white ears, but they are a source of hope for the slaves and, eventually, fuel for their rebellion. As we have mentioned, scripture is scandalous, a source of comfort for the afflicted and affliction for the comfortable. It is fitting that many practices of the Christian church have proven to be radical threats to those in power throughout history.

Nat “toes the line” of cultural expectations, but he obliterates them by baptizing a white man (and—it is implied—a pedophile, no less). This act of radical inclusion (of forgiving the seemingly unforgiveable) and of turning the social order upside down is the last straw for Sam. What will his slave-owning peers think if he lets Nat get away with this? His business could be ruined. Sam promptly orders a severe whipping and the suspension of Nat’s preaching duties. This is also the last straw for Nat as well, who realizes that these white Christians have fully sublimated the teachings of scripture to their own racist worldview. Even more than the murder of Sam, this baptism is Nat’s first true act of rebellion.

Earlier, we talked about the wisdom of God being open to all. Likewise, the love of God and God’s willingness to forget our sins as far as the east is from the west are gifts to all. There can be nothing more radical, or hopeful, than Jesus turning to the thief on the cross next to him and offering him the promise of eternal life. This is radical stuff indeed.

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

1. In your community or in the wider world, where do you see Christianity as a threat to the status quo?
2. In what ways do you see people of faith abandoning radical expressions of faith in an acceptance of “the way things are?”

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Living by the Sword

As we discussed previously, Nat was a man of vision. Yet the times in which he lived left him with precious few resources with which to enact that vision. He didn't have the right to vote, to assemble, to protest, or to exercise economic freedom. All Nat had were the actual tools (axes, sledgehammers, knives, etc.) at his disposal and the bodies of the slaves around him. Nat and his peers could literally see no other way out aside from violently rebelling against their owners.

Yet his wife, Cherry Ann, quietly reminds him—and us—of a universal truth: those who live by the sword will die by the sword (Matthew 26:52). So many of Nat's fellow slaves' violent deaths prove this out. Nat's violent rebellion is remembered to this day as the most successful slave uprising in American history, even as his skin was sewn into relics and his flesh was ground into wagon grease. Of course, injustices are perpetrated against the memory of Nat Turner. Writer/director/actor Nate Parker frequently talks about how the story of Nat Turner is often left out of history books in our schools.

As we remember the life and death of Nat Turner, we can also respectfully question its lasting legacy, especially when held up against the non-violent resistance of legendary leaders like Gadhi, King, Parks, and so many nameless others. Today, we have so many avenues through which to rebel against violence, whether it be the ability to vote, to peacefully assemble, or to create art that sheds light on injustice. It is far too easy to respond to violence with violence, but this only serves to deepen the cycle that ensnares us. Only loving, non-violent actions will set us free.

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

1. Talk about the presence of violence in your community. What is your community of faith's response to violence?
2. Discuss the times in your life or in your community where people have responded to violence with non-violence. What was the cost of this vulnerable response?

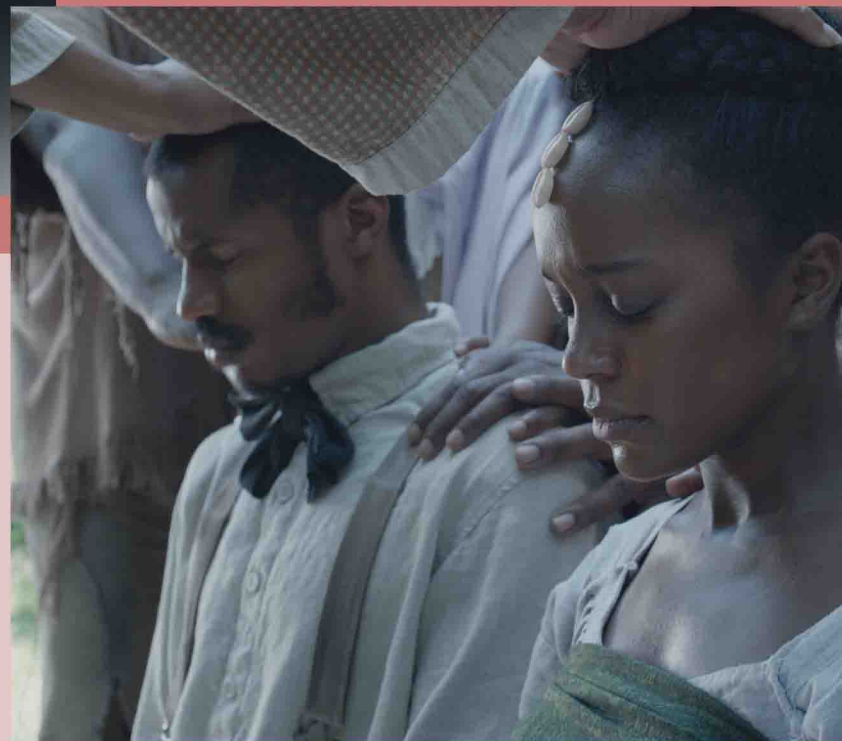
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How Long, Oh Lord?

Although it might often go ignored in communities of faith, a gift of scripture is its frustration with God and God's seeming absence in times of strife. Psalms alternate back and forth between songs of praise and prayers of lament. The book of Lamentations is, essentially, one painful question, "How long, oh Lord?" But when was the last time you heard a pastor preach from the book of Lamentations? It feels like many people and communities of faith are far less comfortable with doubt and frustration than scripture actually is.

Though brief and quiet, **The Birth of a Nation** makes space for such questions and doubt. Nat's fellow slave, Hark, repeatedly asks him where God is, especially after he has had to turn over his wife to a drunken slave owner for the night. This surely must be the place from which God feels utterly absent. As much as Nat "waited on the Lord" and encouraged his fellow slaves to do so as well, he ultimately had to act. And when he did, he ultimately claimed that God was with them.



QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

1. In your spiritual journey, has it ever seemed like God was absent or far away? If you feel comfortable doing so, share these experiences. How did you work through them?
2. In what ways does your community of faith make room for questions and doubt? How might you create more space for them for members of your community?

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Scriptural Shouting Matches

To anyone who has been or is involved in communities of faith—whether black or white, Christian or otherwise—one scene in **The Birth of a Nation** will feel far too familiar. After baptizing a white man, Nat gets into a shouting match with a local white preacher that is offended by Nat's actions. The two scream verses of scripture back and forth, each of them stubbornly leaning on passages that support their side. It ends with Nat receiving a fierce blow to the head and, later, a brutal beating.

On almost every major life issue, people of faith have conflicting opinions, and they are quick to resort to scripture that supports their point of view. We've all been guilty of such behavior or at least of championing public figures who echo our beliefs. Resorting to scripture to support how we dress or what we eat might be one thing, but it's a completely different matter when we use it to oppress others around us. Such uses of Scripture make religious extremists of us all.

We should be careful with how tightly we hold on to scripture and how confident we are in its meaning for our lives. After all, we're left with the troubling character of Jesus, who, being well versed in Jewish scripture and tradition, frequently broke with it in order to love and serve others.

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

1. Talk about the times in your life when you have been involved in scriptural shouting matches. How were these conflicts resolved?
2. How does your community of faith handle controversies that arise of different interpretations of scripture?

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A New Spiritual Vision

One of the many strengths of **The Birth of a Nation** is that it refuses to completely impose a Christian worldview on the narrative and breaks from the ways in which “spiritual heroes” have traditionally depicted. The film honors—and treats with reverence—the African religious and spiritual traditions that formed so much of the slaves’ spiritual experience. From a young Nat visiting the elder at the campfire to wedding ceremonies, African spiritual traditions permeate the film.

As Nat preaches from the Bible about God and Jesus, he expresses a deep and abiding Christian faith. It is one that gives him comfort and courage. However, the film also gives us brief, but powerful, insight into his spirituality and the ways in which he might see the objects of his devotion. In the process, the film teaches us that our theologies and religious worldviews are shaped as much by our lived experiences as they are the holy books we read. In moments of great trauma and pain, Nat has a vision of a black, winged angel. This will no doubt surprise some viewers that quickly imagine God as an old bearded white man or angels as chubby cherubs. But given his experiences of slavery at the hands of white people, how could he envision God as anything other than non-white? In fact, another scene in the film shows a hooded white man lurking in the woods. This can be seen as another one of Nat’s spiritual visions, but this time it’s a vision of evil.

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

1. Think about your experience of faith. In what ways is it shaped by other faith traditions or different worldviews?
2. How does your community of faith interact with different faith traditions or other religious communities? How might such interactions benefit your community?

The Birth of a Nation reminds us that our actions—the ways in which we treat others—does more to spread (or halt the spread of) our faith than the messages we preach. It also shows us that our faith can be shaped by traditions and experiences outside our specific religious community, which should instill in us a greater respect for those who follow faith traditions different than ours.

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The Necessity of Bearing Witness

This is in no way intended to belittle the horrors of slavery, but, in the film, Nat might well have carried on living on the Turner plantation, working and preaching. But his travels took him further afield and exposed him to the unspeakable brutalities of slavery, many of which he hadn't personally experienced at the hands of his owners. This sparks a change in Nat, a change in tone, theology, and action. He can no longer actively support the slave owners with his preaching after seeing what he has seen.

There are two other nods to the importance of witnessing in the film. As Nat hangs, a white boy struggles to get a good look, while Simon, the young slave that betrayed the rebellion, stares on. We don't know what's to become of the white boy, but by watching the hanging and taking in the hate thrown at Nat, he is learning a particular behavior and worldview of who has worth and who doesn't. As the film concludes, there is a crossfade over Simon's tear-filled eyes. He has born witness to the effects of his betrayal and to Nat's fate. He is now a member of the Union army, fighting in the Civil War.

What we see affects us, and what we choose to see matters. Are we in places that make us vulnerable, or are we safe in our "comfort zones?" How do we talk to others, especially younger generations, about what we see?

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

1. Think about your day-to-day experiences of work, social interaction, and time with family. Do you have opportunities to encounter people different from you? If so, how do you grow through these experiences? If not, how might you experience a greater amount of diversity in your life?
2. In what ways does your community of faith extend itself into the wider world? How do you serve those closest to you? How do you serve those farther afield? In what ways have these experiences contributed to spiritual growth within your community?