

**“ABRAHAM LINCOLN:
THE SPIRITUAL GROWTH OF A PUBLIC MAN”
BY ELTON TRUEBLOOD**

Background on the Selection

This reading is taken from Trueblood’s 1973 spiritual biography of President Lincoln (1809–1865) with a foreword by Alonzo McDonald.

Group Discussion Questions

1 In the opening paragraphs, Trueblood states that Lincoln’s public actions were driven by something deeper than politics. What are the three elements he sees? Do you agree with his assessment?

2 Do you agree with Trueblood’s idea that Lincoln’s time was like his own in 1973? How about today? Do you see yourself or your culture in this statement at the end of the first section: “The difficulty was not that of following a moral principle at personal cost; the difficulty was that of knowing what to do when there is more than one principle, and when the principles clash”? In his Foreword, McDonald asks us to consider how Lincoln would view the consequences of our culture’s growing *absence* of principles. Does that idea affect how you respond?

3 In the sections after “his spiritual foundation,” consider the evidence Trueblood presents. How compelling is it to you? How does your spiritual foundation compare with what you see in Lincoln’s life? Are you seeing evidence of growth in your spiritual journey? If you are in a position of leadership, are you continuing to grow now as much as you did earlier in your life?

4 What is Trueblood saying by calling Lincoln a theologian? What do you see as the core of his theology? Is the term “anguish” a useful one? Where is the role of the nation in Lincoln’s theology?

5 Trueblood writes that “Lincoln’s was the kind of mind which did not reach its true magnitude except in experiences of sorrow and of strain.” How do

you respond to such a statement? What sort of assessment might people make of your own character?

6 Did Lincoln succeed in “transcending nationalism” for something greater? How can a leader communicate a potentially unpopular ideal in a time of suffering? Of cynicism?

7 Consider the attacks and hatred Lincoln endured. How well-founded were his critics? What were they looking at? What resources did he draw on to sustain himself? How would you respond to similar attacks?

8 Consider the question of tactics. Trueblood argues that Lincoln was committed to “the possible” in his attempts to follow the divine will. Is this helpful for achieving some progress or limiting if the bar is set too low? Is there a way to maintain a balance between skepticism and fanaticism? Did Lincoln find the appropriate balance in his own situation? What do you make of Trueblood’s distinction between thinkers and politicians? Must there be a separation?

9 Look at the section with the sermon of Dr. Vinton. What was it that finally reached Lincoln? What happened next? Do you have a similar perspective undergirding your actions?

10 What type of vision is necessary for actors in history to see larger patterns that history? Do you agree that history is “a theater for the working out of the moral law”?

11 How would you assess Lincoln’s character after reading this selection? How did he, in Trueblood’s reading, avoid self-righteousness? What was the role of paradox in his theology? What virtues might it bring?

12 How does Trueblood’s summary of the mature stage of Lincoln’s theology challenge or affirm your own understanding of the interaction between human and divine at a national level? At a local level? Personally?