

Custer Died for Your Sins Discussion Guide

Introduction

First published in 1969, *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto* is a collection of essays by Vine Deloria Jr., an Indigenous leader, a Lutheran theologian and a dedicated advocate for Native rights. The book is part history lesson, part political critique and part social commentary about issues impacting the Indigenous Peoples of what is now known as the United States. Certainly a product of its time, the book uses language and cites current events that reflect the decade in which it was written. However, the core content is sharply relevant today. As Deloria notes in the preface, “The central message of this book, that Indians are alive, have certain dreams of their own, and are being overrun by the ignorance and the mistaken, misdirected efforts of those who would help them, can never be repeated too often.”

The discussion questions provided below will help readers think more deeply, critically and practically about *Custer Died for Your Sins* and the topics it examines. You are encouraged to read and discuss the book as part of the [ELCA’s Truth and Healing Movement](#). The truth, and our knowing and embracing it, is the first step toward healing for all of us.

Discussion Questions

1. In the chapter on “Indian Humor,” Deloria provides some background on the title of the book. What was your initial reaction to the phrase “Custer died for your sins”? Did you find it humorous? Why or why not? Is the title still relevant today? Who are the sinners, and what sins do they commit? What steps can be taken toward atonement?
2. Chapter 2 notes that the “basis for taking Indian land was pronounced by the Christian churches shortly after the discovery of the New World, when the doctrine of discovery was announced” (30). What is this doctrine, and why is it relevant today? As Lutherans, how are we called to [repudiate the Doctrine of Discovery](#), both in the life of the church and individually?
3. According to Deloria, “the largest difference . . . between Indian religion and Christian religions is in interpersonal relationships,” as “Indian religion taught that sharing one’s goods with another human being was the highest form of behavior” (121). What are some similarities between the Indian religion Deloria describes and the teachings of Jesus? What can Christians learn from Indigenous ways of life and spirituality?
4. Chapter 5 opens, “One of the major problems of the Indian people is the missionary” (101). Were you surprised by this statement? How have the Church and missionaries been a major problem for Indian People historically? How are they a major problem for Indian People today? How can the Church address these issues? What would Christian missions look like if they were reoriented toward relationship-building, community and sharing?
5. How has the book changed your understanding of treaties between Indigenous Tribes and the federal government? Have you researched the treaties that impact the land where you live? Why or why not? What is the history and current state of those treaties? What is the history and current

state of the Tribe(s) involved? What can you do in your local area to support treaty rights? What can you do at the state and federal levels?

6. For many non-Native Americans, family lore includes stories of an Indigenous ancestor, most often a “full-blooded” great-grandmother somewhere in the family line. Deloria calls it the “Indian-grandmother complex” (3). What are your thoughts on this phenomenon? Have you encountered it in your own family or social circles? How is it a product of racism? How does it undercut Tribal identity and sovereignty? How can non-Natives confront and counteract these stories?
7. In the chapter “Indians Today,” Deloria states that “Indians are probably invisible because of the tremendous amount of misinformation about them” (12). What are some examples of misinformation we see today, and how does it contribute to making Native Peoples invisible? What can be done to combat it? What role can the government play in spreading and stopping the misrepresentation of Indigenous Peoples? What about the media, the sports industry and entertainment? What about the Church? What role can you play personally?
8. Throughout the book Deloria discusses the mythological aspects of American history, not only in terms of “the mythical Indians of stereotype-land” (2) but also in the “mythical generalities of what built this country and made it great” (52). However, the author notes that “both whites and Indians were buried under the weight of popular pseudo-history” (202). What does he mean by this? While American mythology serves to erase Indigenous Peoples, how does it also cheat white people?
9. How has the book changed your overall perspective on Native Peoples and Tribes? How has it altered your view of the past, present and future of the United States? How has it changed your thoughts on the Church’s approach to Indigenous ministries and Tribal relations?
10. After reading *Custer Died for Your Sins*, do you think there are challenges that Deloria writes about that Indigenous People and Native Nations continue to face, and what might those be? Most importantly, what do you want to learn more about? What do you feel called to do?

Deloria, Vine Jr., *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto*, 2nd ed., University of Oklahoma Press, 1988.