Discussion Guide

Liberty, Complexity and the Living God



This discussion guide is designed for 50-minute adult classes and small groups of 6–16 participants and is based on Today's Conversation podcast with historian Mark Noll and Walter Kim, president of the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE.org/nollpodcast). No prior listening is required, as the leader will draw out key ideas through discussion.

"From the revolution, we know that people standing on the sidelines — the enslaved who thought maybe the British were the liberators, the Natives whose land was being dispossessed — they're really important too … And when we promote policies … we need to do that with a kind of awareness that no individual, no policy is going to set things perfectly right, and all policies, all individuals stand before the living God to answer for their misdeeds as well as for what they've done properly."

—MARK NOLL, HISTORIAN AND AUTHOR

OPENING AND ORIENTATION (8 min)

FRAMING STATEMENT FOR LEADERS: In 2026, the United States marks 250 years since the Declaration of Independence. Mark Noll invites us into a richer, more honest account of that history — one that holds together high ideals and real failures, patriotism and prophetic critique, Christian conviction and humble self-examination. For followers of Jesus, this is not a partisan exercise. It is the way the Bible itself tells the story of God's people.

"He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8).

1. When you think about the founding of the United States, what story were you taught — primarily a story of heroism and ideals, of failure and injustice, or something more complicated? Where did that story come from?

2. Noll says that if you try to say just one thing about the revolutionary era, you'll get it wrong. Where in your own life have you found that holding complexity is harder — but more truthful — than a simple answer?

Leader tip: *Begin with curiosity, not conclusions. Surface the variety of stories already in the room. People will have been taught very different versions of American history. That diversity is itself a gift to the discussion.*

Noll shows that Christian faith has always been woven into American public life, but sometimes in ambiguous ways. Patriots and loyalists both cited Romans 13. Abolitionists and slaveholders both claimed the Bible. Thomas Paine drew on 1 Samuel to argue for independence. The same Scripture that fueled liberation also provided cover for oppression. Our readings of Scripture are not inerrant, and we need many voices to correct our blind spots. As Noll puts it, whoever stands on the sidelines in our political moment gives us crucial information about what policies are actually doing.

> *"Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy" (Proverbs 31:8–9).*

> *"Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established…" (Romans 13:1) / "We must obey God rather than human beings" (Acts 5:29).* Both texts were cited in the Revolution — by opposite sides.

1. Patriots and loyalists both read Romans 13 to support opposite positions. When have you seen the Bible used to justify a political conclusion you later questioned? What helped you see it differently?

2. Abolitionists like Lemuel Haynes and Phyllis Wheatley used the Declaration's language of liberty to argue against slavery. What does it look like today to hold America accountable to its best ideals? What role can the Church play?

3. All people have dignity because their dignity is derived from God, not from their views or behavior. How does this principle change how we talk about immigration, poverty or criminal justice?

Walter Kim and Mark Noll make a striking claim: The Bible itself models the kind of honest, complex storytelling our national moment requires. Scripture presents King David both as a man after God's own heart and as an adulterer and murderer whom the prophet Nathan confronts. In the same way, George Washington's integrity and his ownership of enslaved people belong in the same sentence.

Noll also points to John Witherspoon — the only clergyman to sign the Declaration of Independence — whose patriotic sermon ended not with a call to arms but with a call to repentance. He advocated for his political position but refused to declare his side fully righteous. Noll suggests that this combination of conviction and humility offers a model for Christians in public life today.

> *"Then Nathan said to David, 'You are the man!'" (2 Samuel 12:7) / "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love … wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin" (Psalm 51:1–2).*

> *"Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires" (James 1:19–20).*

1. Noll compares George Washington to King David — a person of genuine virtue and genuine failure. Who in our own national story might deserve that kind of honest, two-sided reckoning? What makes that kind of honesty hard?

2. Witherspoon ended his patriotic sermon with a call to repentance. What would it look like for Christian leaders today to advocate for political positions while simultaneously calling their own side to humility and self-examination?

3. How can spiritual practices help you resist anxiety in heated political conversations?

Leader tip: *This section can surface strong feelings about specific figures or events. Keep the focus on the principle — that Scripture models complexity — rather than relitigating particular debates. The goal is formation, not argument.*

RENEWAL MOVEMENTS AND THEIR SHADOW SIDES (8 min)

Noll traces how the First and Second Great Awakenings reshaped American life — democratizing faith, empowering laypeople, and fueling both the abolitionist movement and, paradoxically, the deeper entrenchment of slavery in areas where revival had taken hold. As churches gained greater influence among slaveholders, it became more difficult for Christians to speak prophetically against enslavement.

The lesson is sobering: Evangelical pragmatism and ambition can lead to compromises that wound the very people we are meant to serve. The Christianization of a culture is not the same as the transformation of that culture. Success itself can become a spiritual danger.

THEOLOGICAL FRAMING: We must guard against the temptation to equate the success of a movement with the faithfulness of that movement. The Church's growth in numbers or cultural influence does not guarantee that it is serving the vulnerable, speaking for the voiceless, or resisting the corrupting pressures of power. Faithfulness requires our ongoing self-examination in the light of all Scripture — including attention paid to the voices of those at the margins.

> *"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18–19).*

1. Noll describes how revival movements that Christianized the American South also made it harder to oppose slavery. Can you think of a way that the Church's cultural success today might be making it harder to hear or speak a prophetic word?

2. The Puritans pursued freedom for themselves while denying it to others. Roger Williams, a Puritan minister and theologian, challenged them by appealing to the Scriptural principles they claimed to uphold. Who in our day might be playing the role of Roger Williams — exposing where the Church's principles aren't being applied equally?

WHO IS STANDING ON THE SIDELINES? (9 min)

Noll's most pointed challenge for today comes near the end of his conversation with Walter Kim. He argues that whenever we promote policies or favor individuals, we must ask: Who is standing on the sidelines? During the American Revolution, this included enslaved people and displaced Native communities. Their very presence exposed the gap between the movement's ideals about liberty and its lived reality. Yet this tension is not a reason to abandon those ideals; rather, it is a call to extend them more fully and more justly. Closing our distance with those on the margins shapes our understanding of justice, our reading of Scripture, and our advocacy in the public square. This kind of spiritual formation informs and drives our action.

> *"Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me" (Matthew 25:40).*

> *"When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the Lord your God" (Leviticus 19:33–34).*

ASK WHO IS MISSING In your congregation or community, who are the people standing on the sidelines of power? Whose voice is absent from the room when decisions are made?	**VISIT THE MARGINS** Consider a border visit, serving in prison ministry, volunteering with refugee resettlement, or sharing a meal with an immigrant neighbor. Let proximity form your convictions.
READ WIDELY Seek out the voices of those who have been marginalized — Black abolitionists, indigenous writers, immigrant theologians. Let their readings of Scripture challenge your own.	**ADVOCATE WITH HUMILITY** When you engage with elected officials or public policy, bring both a specific ask and a spirit of repentance — acknowledging that no policy is perfect and all of us stand before the living God.

1. In your own community or congregation, who is "standing on the sidelines" today? How might their presence or exclusion serve as judgment on how we apply the values of liberty and dignity that we claim to stand for?

2. Proximity to people on the margins — whether individuals with disabilities, immigrants, those experiencing poverty or homelessness — can profoundly shape both our compassion and our convictions on public life. Who has God placed in your life to do that kind of forming work in you?

3. What is one public issue where you feel called to engage? What would it look like to engage it with both conviction and Witherspoon's spirit of repentance?

CLOSING REFLECTION AND PRAYER (3 min)

Mark Noll closes with a vision of "stronger churches with stronger voices articulating support for those who have the least public support." He points to the Gospel of Luke, where Jesus makes clear that his mission is directed especially toward those most in need. This is not a political program, but a commitment to formation — allowing Christ to shape who we see, whose voice we amplify, and whose dignity we defend.

CLOSING PRAYER: "Lord, you have written the stories of your people with unflinching honesty — their courage and their blindness, their faith and their failure. Give us the same honesty about our own nation and our own hearts. Form us by your Spirit to see those standing on the sidelines — the most vulnerable — not as political problems but as neighbors made in your image. And give us the courage and the humility of Witherspoon: to act on our convictions while standing in repentance before you. Amen."

LEADER RESOURCES AND FURTHER READING

NAE PODCAST Today's Conversation with Mark Noll — listen before leading for richer context on the Puritans, the Revolution, the Great Awakenings, and biblical complexity. NAE.org/nollpodcast	**FOR THE HEALTH OF THE NATION** NAE's comprehensive framework for Christian civic engagement, covering the sanctity of life, religious freedom, justice, immigration and more. NAE.org/forthehealth
MARK NOLL'S BOOKS The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind; America's Book: The Rise and Decline of a Bible Civilization; The Civil War as a Theological Crisis.	**FOLLOWING THE GOD WHO TRANSFORMS** NAE's devotional designed to refresh and encourage believers in who God is and his heart for our nation and world, focusing on public discipleship and civic responsibility. NAE.org/followinggoddevo

Series note: *This is a discussion guide in Faith in America, a small group curriculum developed by the National Association of Evangelicals and based on Today's Conversation podcast with Mark Noll and Walter Kim. Other guides in the series can be used on their own or as part of the full four-part series.*