Discussion Guide

Renewal, Identity and Welcome



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 church historian Aaron Griffith and Walter Kim, president of the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE.org/griffithpodcast). No prior listening is required, as the leader will draw out key ideas through discussion.

"The point of these revivals, in many ways, was not to start new denominations or new churches as much as it was to revive what a lot of participants saw as really stale, morbid forms of Christianity that they thought were not effective and were not faithful. And so we see in the 18th century the beginning of Wesleyan traditions emerge with the influence of John and Charles Wesley, trying to revive Anglicanism, or within North America, with the influence of Francis Asbury, who helped pioneer this emerging Methodist movement. These are all renewal strains of Christianity that are trying to revive, and that revival looked different depending on where you were."

—AARON GRIFFITH, HISTORIAN AND AUTHOR

OPENING AND ORIENTATION (8 min)

FRAMING STATEMENT FOR LEADERS: In 2026, the United States commemorated 250 years since the Declaration of Independence. With that milestone in mind, a question continues to press on many Christians: Who are we as followers of Jesus, as Americans and as neighbors to a diverse world? This session explores that question through the lens of evangelical history, Scripture and the people God has placed among us.

"For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome ... He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing. And you are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt" (Deuteronomy 10:17–19).

1. When you think about your own church tradition or denominational background, what do you know about where it came from? Is there an immigration story, a revival story or a reform movement in its history?

2. How would you describe your own identity? Which comes first for you in most moments: your faith, your nationality, your ethnicity or your political views? What shapes that priority for you?

Leader tip: *Keep this opener light and personal. You're building trust and surfacing the diversity already in the room before moving into harder territory.*

THE DNA OF RENEWAL AND ITS COMPLICATIONS (12 min)

Historian Aaron Griffith argues that a common thread connecting diverse evangelical denominations is a shared DNA of renewal — a recurring pattern of God's Spirit reviving what has become stale or institutional. From the Wesleyan revivals to Azusa Street and into the present, evangelicalism has been less about a fixed form than about a hunger for authentic encounter with God.

But Griffith also points to a shadow side. The same energy that fueled abolition and women's education also produced what scholars call the "benevolent empire" — well-intentioned movements that became paternalistic, and at times failed to see the full dignity of the people they sought to serve.

> *"I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you ..." (Ezekiel 36:26) / "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: the old has gone, the new is here!" (2 Corinthians 5:17).*

> *"Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice … to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter — when you see the naked, to clothe them?" (Isaiah 58:6–7).*

1. Griffith says evangelicalism has a "renewal DNA" — a recurring pattern where God revives stale faith. Where do you see signs that renewal is needed today? What might that renewal look like?

2. The "benevolent empire" described people doing good with blind spots about power and paternalism. Can you think of a time — in history or in your own experience — when well-meaning Christians helped in ways that didn't truly honor the dignity of the people being helped?

3. What is the difference between serving people and walking alongside them? How does that distinction shape how we relate to marginalized communities? Who are some of the marginalized groups in today's society?

IDENTITY IN CHRIST — BIGGER THAN NATION, PARTY OR TRIBE (12 min)

Walter Kim pressed Griffith on a central point: While many evangelicals affirm the inerrancy of Scripture, our interpretations of Scripture are not inerrant. In the 1840s, Southern evangelicals read the same Bible and concluded that slavery was "biblical."

Griffith offers a sobering lesson from history: it was not better theology alone that corrected the church's blind spots — it was relationships. When Christians actually listened to the voices of those pushed to the margins, they began to read the same Bible differently. That is still true today. We do not fully understand God or his Word on our own. We need brothers and sisters whose life experiences differ from ours to show us what we are missing. A church that only hears from people like itself will always have blind spots.

> *"So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith … There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:26–28).*

"After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb" (Revelation 7:9).

"Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household" (Ephesians 2:19).

1. Griffith says that when our churches are racially and economically segregated, our "theological and scriptural imagination will be impoverished." Do you agree? What have you learned about God or Scripture from someone whose background was very different from your own?

2. Paul says in Galatians that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek. He doesn't eliminate those identities, but he does put them in a new order. What would it look like to see others first as children of God — whether an undocumented immigrant, an incarcerated individual or someone from a different political party?

3. The New Testament uses two words to describe the Ephesians' former status: *xenoi* (complete outsiders) and *paroikoi* (resident aliens — present in the community but never fully belonging). Paul says Christ abolished both categories. Who in your community today might fall into one of those two groups — and what would it look like for your congregation to move them from the margins into full belonging?

Leader tip: *This section can surface tension. Lean into it gently. The goal is not consensus but honest reflection. It helps to model vulnerability. Share something you have personally learned from a cross-cultural friendship.*

AMERICA AT ITS BEST (8 min)

At its best, the American experiment expressed aspirations (e.g., human dignity, equality before the law, welcome for those seeking freedom) that resonate with biblical values even when the nation has failed to live up to them. In this moment, Christians have an opportunity to help our nation ask: What do we truly believe about human dignity, and are we living it out?

HISTORICAL NOTE: The Declaration of Independence (1776) asserted that all people are "endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights." Many of the reform movements Griffith describes — abolitionism, women's suffrage, civil rights — appealed directly to this founding language to challenge the nation to live up to its own stated ideals. African American preachers like Frederick Douglass used the Declaration itself as a prophetic standard against slavery.

"Then God said, 'Let us make mankind in our image …'" (Genesis 1:26–27) / "From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands" (Acts 17:26).

1. Frederick Douglass and other Black Christian leaders used the Declaration's language about God-given dignity to argue against slavery. What does it mean for Christians to hold America accountable to its own best aspirations? Is that a form of patriotism, critique or both?

2. If you were to describe the best version of American identity, what would it include? How does your faith shape that vision?

BRIDGE BUILDING IN PRACTICE (7 min)

Timing note: *Be sure to protect time for this section, which is the action-oriented payoff. If you have more than 50 minutes, consider adding a "sharing" moment where participants name someone they already know from a different cultural background and what they've learned from them.*

Griffith tells a revealing story of a church he attended with excellent music, sophisticated theology, and cutting-edge media, but whose wheelchair ramp failed when a visiting elderly woman needed it. "We had everything together... except." The failure wasn't just structural; it exposed a deeper gap in attention, relationship and imagination. Who had been centered in the church's life — and who had not?

Moments like these call for honest reflection: Whose voices are missing from our conversations? Whose needs have we not learned to see? And who remains excluded — not only from access to a building, but from meaningful participation in the life of the community? This question extends beyond disability to include immigrants, the elderly, people who are incarcerated or reentering society, and others whose presence is often overlooked or undervalued.

> *"In the story of The Good Samaritan, Jesus reframes "Who is my neighbor?" as "To whom will you be a neighbor?" (Luke 10:25–37).* The answer crosses ethnic, religious and social lines.

> *"For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in …" (Matthew 25:35).*

LEARN A STORY Invite someone whose experience differs from your own to share their story over a meal. Listen more than you speak.	**CHECK THE RAMP** Ask honestly: Who cannot access our congregation — physically, linguistically, culturally? What would repair look like?
PARTNER LOCALLY Connect with a local nonprofit near you that puts you in greater proximity with people who are vulnerable.	**DIG DEEPER** Listen to the NAE's Difficult Conversations podcast series that explores why we ended up so polarized and how Christians can become the peacemakers that Jesus called blessed (**NAE.org/difficultconversations**).

CLOSING REFLECTION AND PRAYER (3 min)

Griffith closes the podcast with a word of hope: "This faith and this God is bigger than America." This is not a retreat from civic engagement, but a foundation for it. Because we do not need political victories to validate our worth, we can enter difficult conversations with humility and hope rather than fear.

CLOSING PRAYER: "Lord, you have made us your people from every nation, tribe and tongue. Form us — not by party or ideology, but by the grace and love of Jesus Christ. Give us eyes to see the stranger as our neighbor, the courage to hear stories that challenge us, and the humility to recognize that we need the whole body to understand you rightly. May our welcome of others reflect your welcome of us. Amen."

LEADER RESOURCES AND FURTHER READING

NAE PODCAST Today's Conversation with Aaron Griffith — listen before leading for richer context on the revival movements, evangelical denominations and evangelical identity. NAE.org/griffithpodcast	**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
AARON GRIFFITH'S BOOKS God's Law and Order: The Politics of Punishment in Evangelical America	**FTHN RIGHTNOW MEDIA VIDEO SERIES** In partnership with RightNow Media, this video series combines dynamic biblical teaching with discussion guides to help small groups apply biblical principles to today's issues as part of holistic discipleship. NAE.org/rightnowmedia

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 Aaron Griffith and Walter Kim. Other guides in the series can be used on their own or as part of the full four-part series.*