Discussion Guide

Persuasion, Not Coercion



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 religious freedom advocate Tim Schultz and Walter Kim, president of the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE.org/schultzpodcast). No prior listening is required, as the leader will draw out key ideas through discussion.

"God gives Adam and Eve the choice to eat of the tree or to not … When they fall, he doesn't come in using coercion. He gives them a choice … Jesus tells [the rich young ruler the way to eternal life] and he goes away and Jesus just lets him go. He doesn't use his rhetorical skill to kind of browbeat him into the kingdom."

—TIM SCHULTZ, PRESIDENT OF 1ST AMENDMENT PARTNERSHIP

OPENING AND ORIENTATION (8 min)

FRAMING STATEMENT FOR LEADERS: America's founding commitment to religious freedom was not secular indifference to faith. It was built on the conviction that coercion corrupts religion and that faith freely chosen is the only kind of faith that flourishes. Tim Schultz argues that this principle, which is rooted in Scripture, has profound implications today — for how Christians witness to their neighbors and build a more resilient society for everyone.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him" (John 3:16–17).

1. When you think about how you came to faith, did someone play a key role — not through pressure or winning an argument, but through love, patience or simply living out their faith? What made the difference?

2. Tim Schultz says the founders believed "coercion corrupts religion." Have you ever seen that play out — where pressure or social expectation to be religious produced something hollow or counterproductive?

Leader tip: *Keep this opener personal and warm. The aim is to connect the abstract principle of non-coercion to lived experience before engaging the historical and theological material.*

THE BIBLICAL ROOTS OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM (10 min)

Tim Schultz traces a striking biblical argument: From the Garden of Eden to the rich young ruler, the prodigal son, and Paul's letter to Philemon, Scripture consistently shows a God who woos rather than compels, who allows rather than coerces, and who calls his people to do the same.

Walter Kim sharpens the point: Non-coercion does not mean indifference. Jesus let the rich young ruler walk away — but "The Scripture says he looked on him and loved him." The absence of compulsion is not the absence of deep love. This is the model for Christian witness in a pluralistic society: conviction without coercion, and love without manipulation.

FROM SCRIPTURE: THE THREAD OF NON-COERCION

- Garden of Eden: God gives Adam and Eve a real choice — and when they fall, he comes in walking softly, wooing rather than forcing (Genesis 2–3).
- Rich young ruler: Jesus tells him the truth, watches him walk away, and does not pursue or manipulate. "Jesus looked at him and loved him" (Mark 10:21).
- Prodigal son: The father shockingly grants his son the freedom to destroy himself, then watches and waits and runs to meet him when he returns (Luke 15:11–32).
- Paul to Philemon: "I could order you to free Onesimus — but I'm not going to do that." Even on a matter of profound moral clarity, the Apostle chooses persuasion over compulsion (Philemon 1:8–9).

> *"Jesus looked at him and loved him. 'One thing you lack,' he said. 'Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.' At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth" (Mark 10:21–22).*

> *"Although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, yet I prefer to appeal to you on the basis of love" (Philemon 1:8–9).*

1. Schultz points out that in each of his biblical examples — the Garden of Eden, the rich ruler, the prodigal son, Philemon — God and his representatives choose persuasion over coercion even when they have the power and the moral clarity to compel. What does this say about how we should engage people who disagree with us on matters of faith or public life?

2. Walter Kim says non-coercion "doesn't mean a lack of interest." What does deep, loving concern for someone's flourishing look like without pressure or manipulation? Can you think of a relationship in your own life that models this?

3. How does the biblical pattern of non-coercion shape the tone, not just what we say, but how we engage in public life?

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AS A GIFT FOR THE OTHER (10 min)

Schultz argues that the deepest Christian witness on religious freedom is not primarily self-protective (i.e., "Let me practice my faith without interference"), but other-directed: using hard-won freedom to defend the rights of those who don't share our faith. He tells the story of Thomas Kennedy, a five-point Calvinist Scottish immigrant and Maryland state delegate who in 1824 — having never met a Jew in his life — introduced legislation to allow Jewish citizens to hold public office in Maryland. He was run out of the legislature, but later returned and won. A statue of him stands in the Maryland House of Delegates to this day.

Seeking the good of all people must grow out of a rooted identity in Christ. Kennedy did not compromise his Calvinist convictions. He acted from them. His faith formed him into someone who could extend liberty to a neighbor he had never met. In the same way, our care for and advocacy for neighbors on the margins — here in America or around the world — springs out of a slow, continual and intentional participation with Christ to become more like him.

HISTORICAL VOICE: THOMAS KENNEDY, MARYLAND, 1824 Kennedy was a Scottish Calvinist with "quite particular views about theology." He introduced the Maryland Jew Bill to extend the right to hold public office to Jewish citizens. He was defeated and run out of the legislature. Two years later he was re-elected and passed the bill. As Schultz puts it: "You don't have to be a squishy person with no convictions. You should be forceful about your convictions. But one of those convictions is non-coercion."

"Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you prosper" (Jeremiah 29:7).

1. Thomas Kennedy went out of his way to defend the rights of people he had never met and whose faith he did not share. What would it look like for your church to do something similar — to defend or advocate for the religious freedom of a Muslim, Jewish or other non-Christian community in your area?

2. Schultz distinguishes between "interfaith" (which some hear as suggesting that all religions are equally true) and "multi-faith" (which creates space for shared work for the common good while maintaining distinct convictions). How does that distinction help you think about building partnerships with immigrants and communities of different faiths?

3. Walter Kim connects the biblical pattern of Moses, Daniel and Paul — all appealing for the freedom to worship — to a larger principle: Christians who have experienced persecution should be most eager to extend freedom to others. How have your own experiences — whether of exclusion or belonging — shaped your commitment to welcoming others?

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.*

A NON-COERCIVE FAITH AND A MORE RESILIENT NATION (9 min)

Schultz makes a striking observation about civic life: For decades, there was a broad consensus — especially on the political right — that faith-based organizations were essential partners in addressing social needs the government could not meet on its own. From supporting pregnant mothers to resettling refugees, assisting with prisoner re-entry, and providing health care, these ministries were seen as a vital expression of both religious freedom and civic responsibility.

That consensus is now beginning to fray. In some circles, forms of compassionate, faith-based service are dismissed as "woke," creating confusion about what faithful public engagement actually looks like. Schultz argues that this shift is both theologically misguided and practically dangerous — resulting in diminished care and greater strain on limited resources.

This connects directly to the NAE's vision set out in "For the Health of the Nation" in which we engage in the public square not to win political battles but to bless our communities — protecting the sanctity of life, safeguarding religious freedom, supporting immigrants and other vulnerable communities, and caring for prisoners.

> *"You are the salt of the earth… You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden … let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:13–16).*

> *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" (Luke 4:18).*

1. Schultz describes the faith-based sector as doing work that makes society "much better off" in a way government cannot replicate. Is your congregation involved in any of this work? If not, what would it take to start? If so, how has that work shaped your community?

2. Encounters like serving in prison ministries, with at-risk youth, or visiting the border can expand how we understand justice and public life. What would it look like for your church to build that kind of proximity into its regular rhythms — not as a program, but as a pattern of formation?

3. If our public life flows from who we are becoming, then the formation of citizens matters deeply. Schultz points to churches and other community institutions as key places where that formation happens. How does your congregation shape people to engage in the public good, not just cultivate private life?

PRACTICAL STEPS FOR A NON-COERCIVE WITNESS (8 min)

When asked what practical steps Christians can take to safeguard religious freedom, Tim Schultz points to a simple starting place: shared service. Partner with people of other faiths — or no faith — for the good of your community. This is not about affirming one another's beliefs, but about embodying love in tangible ways. The witness of Christians working alongside rather than against their neighbors is itself a form of proclamation.

As our country continues to reflect on our identity as a nation, we as evangelicals have an opportunity to enter the conversation, not with partisan answers, but with a posture that says: We are people formed by a God who woos rather than compels, who welcomes rather than excludes, whose kingdom is made up of every nation, tribe and tongue.

SERVE ALONGSIDE OTHERS Organize a service project with a local mosque, synagogue, or secular nonprofit. Seek the good of the city together.	**WELCOME THE NEWCOMER** Connect with a World Relief office or local refugee resettlement agency. Many refugees come to the United States, because they have experienced religious persecution.
DEFEND THE OTHER'S FREEDOM When a non-Christian neighbor's religious freedom is threatened — a mosque facing zoning opposition, a Sikh student facing discrimination — speak up. Be the Thomas Kennedy of your community.	**FORM YOUR CONGREGATION AS CITIZENS** Use the NAE + RightNow Media video curriculum on "For the Health of the Nation" in your church's small groups. NAE.org/righnowmedia

1. Schultz says that the best Christian witness on religious freedom is to "go out of your way to defend the rights of people who don't share our faith or our political views.'" Can you think of a specific person or community in your neighborhood whose religious freedom you could actively defend or support?

2. As questions about our national identity continue to surface, how might your congregation engage — not by advancing political arguments, but by embodying a posture of welcome shaped by the kingdom of God?

3. In our churches, it's important to pray that we would be formed not by partisanship but by Christ. What is one specific change in how you engage politically or civically that would reflect that kind of formation?

Leader tip: *If your group has time, close by inviting each person to name one concrete step they will take before the next session — something that crosses a cultural, religious or political line in the spirit of non-coercive love.*

CLOSING REFLECTION AND PRAYER (3 min)

Tim Schultz closes with measured hope: Religious freedom in America is stronger than almost anywhere else in the world, and stronger than it was 12 years ago. Yet because "human nature hasn't changed since the Garden of Eden," the same freedom that allows for flourishing can also be abused. The faithful response is not fear, but a humble and persistent witness — one that woos rather than compels, serves rather than dominates, and loves its neighbor itself.

CLOSING PRAYER: "Lord, you have given us a remarkable gift: a nation where faith can be freely chosen, freely practiced, and freely shared. Form us into people worthy of that gift — not by coercing our neighbors into agreement, but by loving them into encounter with you. Give us the courage of Thomas Kennedy, to defend the freedom of those who do not share our faith. Give us the posture of Witherspoon, to hold our convictions with humility. And give us the witness of the early church, who loved their enemies and reshaped an empire — not by force, but by the persuasive power of a life transformed. Amen."

LEADER RESOURCES AND FURTHER READING

NAE PODCAST Today's Conversation with Tim Schultz — listen before leading for richer context on the founders' four principles, Lactantius, Thomas Kennedy and current religious freedom debates. NAE.org/schultzpodcast	**1st AMENDMENT PARTNERSHIP** Tim Schultz's organization, working on religious freedom policy across all 50 states and at the federal level. 1stAmendmentPartnership.org
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	**WORLD RELIEF** For local partnership opportunities with refugee resettlement and immigration advocacy grounded in evangelical faith. WR.org

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