

DISCIPLESHIP GROUPS

Discipleship Groups of three to four men or women meet regularly to share the deep parts of their lives as they follow Jesus. With a strong commitment to confidentiality, trust and safety are built over time as the members grow in friendship and discipleship. Community that doesn't draw us deeper into discipleship over time becomes just another way to hide in plain sight.

FOUR MOVEMENTS.

Here are four liturgical movements to incorporate into your Discipleship Group. You may not get to all of these every time you gather, but if you aim to practice these four movements regularly, your group will hopefully become more balanced, biblical, and fruitful.

The movements of these conversations matter. We begin our time with **Scripture**, because God always gets the first word. We listen to what he has said and look for ways it applies to our current life circumstance. After we hear how God is speaking, we **share** what is happening in our lives with each other. This sharing compels us to **pray** for each other and the world around us. Finally, as we go, we encourage each other to **participate** in God's mission in our world.

I. SCRIPTURE: Come prepared to share one bit of Scripture that applies to one bit of your life.¹ One bit of Scripture can do any number of things. It can lead you to: (1) adore God, (2) see and hate your sin, or (3) ask for grace (bit.ly/bitofscript). To apply one bit of Scripture to one bit of your life requires at least meditation if not memorization. **This will be the most difficult of the four rhythms to practice outside of your group, but it will be the single greatest determiner of the quality of what happens within your group.** Consider the sobering reality that many of us do not consistently spend time alone with God—connecting with him through Scripture and prayer. “Since almost never does anyone notice whether we do these things or not, and only occasionally does someone ask that we do them, these... acts... suffer widespread neglect.”²

Out of a misguided fear of being legalistic, many Christians are afraid to exhort each other to grow in connecting with God through these basic, quiet acts of reading Scripture and praying. We *should* be afraid of legalism (religion), but we should also be *equally* afraid of license (irreligion). Striving to increasingly obey Scripture's clear commands only becomes legalistic when it is done as an attempt to earn God's forgiveness or avoid his punishment. Instead, time in Scripture and prayer is a glad response to having already been forgiven through Jesus. Regularly feeding on Scripture and praying is not optional for Christians (1 Tim 2:8; Josh 1:8; Rom 10:17; 2 Tim 3:16–17; Ps 119:11; Job 23:12; Eph 6:18; 1 Thess 5:16–18; Jas 4:3; Ps 5:3; Ps 34:15). Where we often go wrong is when we attempt to work *for* God's acceptance rather than working *from* God's acceptance. “Grace is not opposed to effort, it is opposed to earning.”³

It is likely that most members of any given group may not know how to meditate on Scripture or pray in a meaningful way. Many of us have never been taught how to. The following are resources for you as you practice this liturgy together: (1) spend time alone with God (bit.ly/timealone, bit.ly/areadingplan), (2) pray Scripture (bit.ly/prayingthebible), (3) meditate on Scripture (bit.ly/whitnemeditation), and (4) memorize Scripture (fighterverses.com and theversesproject.com).⁴

2. SHARING: Share sanctification, suffering, and sin—in that order. Or, “good fruit,” “what's hard,” and “bad fruit.” This order is informed by Scripture, is full of love and compassion, and looks at the whole picture of our lives. It also prevents imbalance in several directions at once. In other words, some groups dive deep into the good fruit and what's hard, and neglect honest and specific confession of sin. Other groups dive deep into confession of sin, but neglect to encourage one another by pointing out growth they see in each other—however small—or neglect to join each other on the mourning bench.

Do we know how to talk about sin? When someone confesses sin, we shouldn't simply commiserate. Instead, we should aim for the heart (bit.ly/alwaysaimfortheheart), work to develop a plan, recognize the messy nature of growth and change, and lead in

saying “thank you” to God for any good fruit we can spot. We should always consider which of us might be particularly vulnerable in the present moment (traveling, suffering, loneliness, etc.). And we should feel concerned if we can’t identify our own temptations, and blessed if we can. Our chief goal should be to bring our sins out into the open and grow in saying “no” to restless desires (Titus 2:11–12). Read more here: bit.ly/talkaboutsins.

3. PRAYER: No one changes apart from the transforming power of the Spirit. Make sure that your gatherings don’t descend into Christianized “talk therapy.” In mutual discipleship, sharing that does not pivot to prayer on the spot is quickly headed toward self-effort, fueled by self-will.

There is a real sense in which this whole document could be reduced down to the next two sentences and retain 99% of its effectiveness: How do you create an effective, God-glorifying, life-transforming discipleship group? In the words of Ed Welch, *pray one minute longer than you talk!* Far too often, when Christians gather, prayer is tacked on at the end and rushed through hurriedly in five minutes or less, after the “real work” of talk therapy and advice-giving has dragged on for hours. Strive to put heart-centered, Spirit-filled, Scripture-infused prayer at the center, and you will never leave a gathering having wasted your time. **This will be the most difficult of the four rhythms to practice *within* the group, but it will be the single greatest determiner of the quality of what happens *outside* of the group.**

Possible signs we are inviting the Spirit into our prayers are when (1) our prayers comfortably move in and out of silence, (2) when we find ourselves praying more than once, and (3) when we pray Scripture, thoughts, pictures, and even gut impressions, spontaneously brought to mind by God—always filtering them by Scripture and weighing them in wise community.

4. PARTICIPATION: Who are you taking this to? Is it a fellow believer that you are discipling? Is it an unbeliever and skeptic that you need to share this with? How are you going to partner with God by taking what he is revealing to you in his word and applying to your life or investing it in someone? These people could be your children, family, friends, co-workers, neighbors, or others. Whom around you needs encouragement, challenge, investment? And who would you *most* love to see become a disciple of Jesus? Who is your heart best shaped to reach for Jesus? Alan Hirsch suggests that we continually ask: (1) Are we in close proximity to those we feel called to? (2) Are we spending regular time with these people? (3) Are we too busy to develop meaningful relationships?

THREE KINDS OF GROUPS.

There are really only three kinds of discipleship groups: **gospel-centered, religious, or irreligious.** “The power of [a **gospel-centered** Discipleship Group] comes in two movements. It first says, ‘I am more sinful and flawed than I ever dared believe,’ but then quickly follows with, ‘I am more accepted and loved than I ever dared hope.’”⁵ The first statement fends off irreligion, and the second fends off religion. The primary challenge for us is staying alert to the need to fend off both at the same time!⁶

Religious discipleship groups traffic in “cuss jar accountability” where the members can only offer their fellow confessors shame and punishment. Instead of trusting by faith that Jesus took our punishment on the cross and atoned for our sin, we try and atone for our sins through mutual punishment. As a result, religious discipleship groups tempt people to start lying or stop coming. *Religious discipleship groups don’t last long because eventually everyone gets bled to death.*

Irreligious discipleship groups traffic in “confession booth” accountability, where we confess our sins, pat each other on the back, and “depart absolved of any guilt, fearing merely the passing frown of our fellow confessor.”⁷ Instead of passionately pursuing “the holiness without which no one will see the Lord” (Heb 12:14), irreligious discipleship groups devolve into “circles of cheap grace, through which we obtain cheap peace from a troubled conscience.”⁸ Our confession stops short of repentance as we confess the same sins over and over and refuse to take violent action against them.⁹ *Irreligious discipleship groups don’t last long because eventually everyone gets bored to death.*

[Footnotes: bit.ly/discipleshipgroup]

Cut this card out and place it in your Bible as a cheat sheet for your Discipleship Group gatherings.

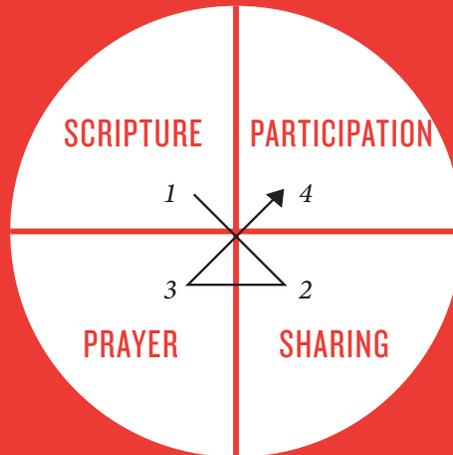


DISCIPLESHIP GROUP LITURGY

Four Movements

One bit of Scripture that applies to one bit of your life.

Spirit-empowered prayer to God and for others.



Participate in God's mission. Who are you taking this to?

*Sanctification "Good fruit"
Suffering "What's hard?"
Sin "Bad fruit"*