

Discipleship groups of three to four men or women meet regularly to share the “fine china” of their lives. With a strong commitment to confidentiality, trust and safety are built over time as the members grow in friendship and discipleship. A discipleship group (or “d-group”) is ideally formed from within a community group and—in concert with family meals and missional living—serves as one of the three rhythms of a healthy community group. Community that doesn’t draw us deeper into discipleship over time becomes just another way to hide in plain sight. Finally, before you begin any discipleship group, listen to bit.ly/alwaysaimfortheheart and discuss how you’ll apply it.

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.’”¹ 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!² Religious d-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 d-groups tempt people to start lying or stop coming. Religious d-groups don’t last long because eventually everyone gets bled to death. Irreligious d-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.”³ Instead of passionately pursuing “the holiness without which no one will see the Lord” (Heb 12:14), irreligious d-groups devolve into “circles of cheap grace, through which we obtain cheap peace from a troubled conscience.”⁴ Our confession stops short of repentance as we confess the same sins over and over and refuse to take violent action against them.⁵ Irreligious d-groups don’t last long because eventually everyone gets bored to death.

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 can hopefully become more balanced, biblical, and fruitful.

[1] Scripture: Come prepared to share what you have read in Scripture this past week, yes, but more particularly make it a goal to bring one bit of Scripture that applies to one bit of your life.⁶ 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 in 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.”⁷

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 command to read Scripture and pray only becomes legalistic when it is done as an attempt to earn God’s forgiveness or avoid his punishment, rather than as a glad response to having already been forgiven through Jesus. Regularly feeding on Scripture and praying is non-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.”⁸

In Colossians 3:16, Paul urges all Christians to “let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.” How can we teach and admonish each other with “all wisdom” if the Word of Christ is not dwelling in us richly? It is likely that most members of any given group may not know how to meditate on Scripture or pray in a meaningful way. Even if they do, they are probably doing it no more than one or two days a week. In light of this normative cultural reality, expect to spend the first six to twelve months of a newly-formed d-group patiently, repeatedly returning to the discipline of spending time alone with God, and patiently, practically equipping each other to read, meditate on, memorize, and pray Scripture. Many of us have never been taught how to: (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), or (4) memorize Scripture (fighterverses.com and theversesproject.com).⁹

HEALTHY DISCIPLESHIP GROUPS: FOUR MOVEMENTS

Before launching a group, you must first listen to bit.ly/alwaysaimfortheheart. Then discuss how you will apply it together.

[1] Scripture: Bring to the group one bit of Scripture that applies to one bit of your life. One bit of Scripture can lead you to: adore God, see and hate your sin, or ask for grace. To apply Scripture requires at least meditation, if not memorization. This will be the most difficult rhythm to maintain outside of your meetings, but will be the greatest determiner of the quality of what happens in your meetings.

[2] Sharing: Sharing includes, in order, (1) sanctification, (2) suffering, and (3) sin. Or, good fruit, what’s hard, and bad fruit. Some are tempted to dive into good fruit and what’s hard, but neglect honest confession of sin. Others move straight to confessing sin, but neglect to encourage each other by pointing out glimpses of God at work, and avoid weeping with those who weep. All three are necessary for health.

[3] Spread of the gospel: Your “three” are people far from God in your sphere of influence you will commit to pray for and pursue. Name the people to whom you feel particularly called and then pray together for God to (1) give you the opportunity to build deeper relationships, (2) share the gospel, and (3) introduce them to your Christian community. Ask: (1) Am I in close proximity with this person to whom I feel called? (2) Am I spending regular time with this person? If not, why not? (3) Am I too busy to develop a meaningful relationship with them?

[4] Spirit-filled prayer: Are you sensitive to promptings from the Holy Spirit? Don’t let your group descend into “talk therapy.” Sharing that does not pivot to prayer on the spot is headed toward self-effort. Most important of all: How do you ensure that you will have an effective, God-glorifying, life-transforming discipleship group? Strive to pray one minute longer than you talk! www.frontlinechurch.com/discipleship

[2] Sharing³: The word ‘sharing’ is cubed in order to represent three more words that start with that same letter: *sanctification*, *suffering*, and *sin*—in that order. Or, “good fruit,” “what’s hard,” and “bad fruit.” David Powlison points out this order is informed by Scripture, is full of love and compassion, and looks at the whole picture, while preventing 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 each other by pointing out growth they see in each other—however small—as well as neglecting to join each other on the mourning bench. *Do we know how to talk about sin?* Ed Welch reminds us that 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] Spreading the gospel: Who are your “three”? These are three non-Christians within your sphere of influence for whom you will commit to pray and engage in intentional gospel relationships. These people could be your children, family, friends, co-workers, neighbors, or others. As one author has put it, whom 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 with those we feel called to? (2) Are we spending regular time with these people? (3) Are we too busy to develop meaningful relationships? Identify and write down three people in each of your lives and then pray together, right on the spot, for God to give you the opportunity to: (1) build a deeper relationship with them, (2) introduce them to Christian community, and (3) share the gospel with them. Pray together that God would save them by opening their eyes to the beauty of Jesus (2 Cor 4:6). Naming and praying for your three every time you gather will guard your d-group against spiritual naval-gazing and self-obsession.

SOME EXAMPLES OF THE FOUR MOVEMENTS

You may not be able to get to all four movements every time, but make sure you incorporate each movement at least some of the time.

Here are some examples of what it might sound like when someone shares.

Scripture: You guys know I get easily intimidated by people, and I’m way too afraid of disapproval. I’ve been camping out in Hebrews 13 this week. *He has said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.” So we can confidently say, “The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?”* (Heb 13:5b–6). On the one hand, when I erase God, I become terrified of what people can do to me, and I feel alone and overwhelmed. On the other hand, when I remember, it means everything that God Himself is with me right now. I’m not alone. If He promises to help me, then the whole situation is different. I’m different, too, when I remember. So it’s starting to make perfect sense to say ‘No’ firmly but graciously. He’s leading me out of my typical sins bit by bit. When I believe the lie, I wimp out, but when I fight to remember what’s true and lean into trusting Him, I find myself standing up to people.

Sharing: Some good fruit I’m seeing in my life is that though I’m still losing my temper with my roommate, which tempts me to feel like nothing’s changed, I am quicker to repent and ask his forgiveness. In the past, I would have pretended like I hadn’t done anything wrong, and tried to avoid the whole conversation. I can see that God is at work, even when I don’t feel like it.

Sharing: Some bad fruit I need to bring into the light is the bitterness I’m feeling towards my boss. I feel like she hasn’t led our team well, and if I’m honest, I don’t trust her anymore... I might actually hate her a little bit. I’ve been increasingly cold towards her, and I find myself resisting the nudge of the Spirit to pray for her and find creative ways to be a blessing to her. Would you guys pray for my heart to soften towards her, and would you please follow up and ask me if I’m gossiping about her to others?

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[4] Spirit-filled prayer: 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. No one changes apart from the transforming power of the Spirit. Consider three common barriers to praying more than we talk. First, *presumption*. It has been well said that we should not presume that God will do for us *apart* from prayer what he has explicitly promised to do for us *only through* prayer! Second, *unbelief*. In the words of an old British missions pamphlet, if our prayer is meager it is because we regard it as supplemental rather than fundamental. Third, *boredom*. Often we don’t pray because, if we’re honest, we find prayer boring. The solution? In the words of Donald Whitney, “when you pray, pray through a passage of Scripture, especially a Psalm” (bit.ly/prayingthebible).

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 unasked for 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 with a sense of having wasted your time. **This will be the most difficult of the four rhythms to practice in 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. Learn more about praying this way here: bit.ly/spiritfilledpraying. Further, do we know how to pray beyond the sick list (bit.ly/sicklist)? There are three strands to biblical prayer. We *should* pray for (1a) physical healing for ourselves and others, and we *can* ask God (1b) to change our circumstances when they’re hard. But we *also* need to pray for (2) hearts devoted to him right in the middle of our circumstances, and, (3) for his kingdom to come. We need to pray for each other that we would bear fruit in the year of drought (Jer 17:5–8). We must remember that our circumstances are significant but not determinative, and praying for changed hearts in the midst of our (possibly) unchanging circumstances is always praying according to God’s will.

[Footnotes: bit.ly/discipleshipgroup]