

Discipleship Rhythm

The Discipleship Tension: When a church offers only one form of discipleship, it runs the risk of marginalizing those who don't fit in a particular box, whether it be spiritually, socially, vocationally, etc. However, one of the dangers of having multiple opportunities for discipleship is that you can end up over-committing to "church programs" at the expense of the kingdom. Community Groups, discipleship groups, and bible studies are like spiritual gas stations for our souls. They are intended to fuel us spiritually so that we can engage our neighbors, our families, and our vocations in spiritually healthy ways. But if we end up spending all of our time at gas stations and never get on the highway, we risk forward movement in the kingdom and the call to live for others. When our spiritual pursuits get in the way of our marriages or undercut our capacity to love our neighbors, we may not be pursuing a proper spiritual balance. When we pursue spiritual programs based on external pressure to conform to the expectations of others, we risk growing bitter versus better.

Remember Your Calling: In Jesus' day, religious people felt the same tension, both internally and externally. His response to the plethora of biblical commands was, *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself"* (Matthew 22). At the end of the day, your calling is to grow in your love for God in heart, mind, and soul. If our love for community becomes an end in itself, it can actually undercut the intimacy we are called to have with God. We want to have a love for God that enables us to step away from community and spend in solitude and prayer (as Jesus did in Luke 5:16). And secondly, you are called to love your neighbor. If our love for Scripture isolates us from our neighbors or our calling to love the orphan and the widow, we may risk becoming Pharisees (James 1:27).

Know Your Freedom In The Gospel: In light of your calling, we want you to feel great freedom at Midtown Church in terms of how you live out your own discipleship. You aren't called to do everything, and you may actually be undercutting your spiritual life if you try to do everything. That being said, your freedom should not lead you into isolation from your church community. In Galatians 5:13, Paul writes, *"For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another"*. The point is that the gospel frees you from trying to live up to the expectation of others, but it nonetheless leads you to invest in others. You are called to move towards community as a God-given means of growing closer to Jesus.

Know Your Unique Needs: Some people may be in a season where a bible study, community group, and discipleship group are all opportunities that they feel the need and capacity for. Perhaps your life-stage affords you an opportunity to engage all of these opportunities without sacrificing your call to love your neighbor. Perhaps you are in a season where you need to figure out how to be different from the world, before you can engage the world in a healthy way, and all of these opportunities help to accomplish this desire. Or perhaps you are in a season, whether due to family commitments, work travel, or other callings, you can realistically only engage in 1 of these opportunities. Where do you feel the most pressing need to grow? Are you in a season where you need some more intentional accountability? Then focus on a discipleship group. Do you feel really intimidated by the Bible and don't know where to start, perhaps a bible study is in order. Generally speaking, we see community groups as the primary place where discipleship happens. So by default we encourage people to start there. As you prayerfully consider where to get involved, we would encourage you not to wrestle in isolation

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with these decisions. Reach out to an elder or the women's shepherding team to help you assess what your discipleship looks like in this season of your life.

Know The Unique Benefits Of Each Growth Opportunity:

- **Community Groups:** Community groups are named as such because they are the context for exploring what it means to live within community. Most importantly, community groups are the primary context for pastoral care in the church. Our shepherding structure runs through community groups, as each group is under the oversight of an elder. When individuals have physical needs in the church, the community group is considered to be the most natural community to come around said need. Furthermore, The risk of separating genders in spiritual growth is that we fail to learn from the other gender. We lose sight of 1 Corinthians 11:11, *"Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman"*. Community groups allow us to redeem our relationships with the opposite sex, whether as singles or couples. Community groups also have the opportunity for a missional element that is not as directly present in discipleship groups and bible studies. In many ways Jesus' relationship with the 12 disciples (which also had accompanying women as seen in Luke 8:1-3) established the first paradigm for community groups.
- **Discipleship Groups:** In many ways, discipleship groups are intended to provide a context for people to pursue intentional and deep Christian friendships. These are same-sex groups which provide a safe place for us to really talk about the things we are struggling with. If you need accountability in an area or a consistent sounding board for sensitive issues in your life, this is the benefit of discipleship groups. Discipleship groups also allow you the opportunity to focus on specific areas of discipleship like family, singleness, sexuality, etc. In many ways, Jesus' relationship with 3 particular disciples (Peter, James, John as seen in Mark 9:2) is the first discipleship group within the church.
- **Bible Studies:** These groups often provide the best opportunity for growing in "biblical literacy". They are the context for really growing in your knowledge of the Scripture, and wrestling with how that knowledge transforms our daily lives. As most of our bible studies are broken down by gender (though this won't always be the case), it also provides a context for connecting with others of the same sex. In this sense it can often serve as a context where discipleship groups can form out of. In many ways, Jesus' frequent teaching before the crowds serves as biblical basis for groups of people gathering to hear God's Word (Matthew 13:1-3).

Questions for Reflection:

- Are you spending more than 2 nights/week on Midtown Church activities (3 nights/week if you are on staff)? If so, you might be at risk of not being properly balanced.
- Where are you the most deficient in your spiritual life? Which opportunity best addresses this deficiency?
- Do you know your neighbors? Do your neighbors know you?
- With whom are you processing your own discipleship needs right now?
- If you have a family, what conversations have you had with them as you consider opportunities to grow individually and collectively?
- Are you growing (numerically and spiritually) in you friendships with Christians?
- How are you doing with pursuing a life of solitude before God as Jesus modeled for us? Are you too busy with community to be able to "withdraw to desolate places and pray"?

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- Do you have a rhythm of slowing down on the Sabbath and truly honoring it as a day of rest? How might any of these discipleship opportunities serve as a help or a hindrance to your ability to rest on the Sabbath?
- Are you committed to worshipping on Sunday morning with Midtown Church as the gathered community of God's people where you can uniquely celebrate the regular means of grace, being preaching of the Word and sacrament of communion (Mark 2:27-28; Acts 20:7)?