

How To Disciple an Immature Prophet (APEST Series)

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Have you ever noticed that some people seem to be wired up to *question everything*? They're always seeing what's wrong, what's unjust, what could be improved. They care about whether we're living out the right values or not. They tend to ask questions that upset the status quo and bring us back to our most fundamental values. These are people the Bible calls **prophets**, and they're great! But they can also be terribly annoying and completely unproductive, especially if they're *immature* in their gifting.

It's important for us as leaders to be able to recognize the immature prophets among us, and disciple them to maturity so they can fulfill their ministry in the Body of Christ. But discipling a prophet is a lot different than discipling someone gifted in another way, so let's talk about the unique challenges and opportunities of discipling immature prophets.

Five gifts for the church

The way I'm using the word "prophet" comes from the Apostle Paul. They're mentioned in Ephesians 4:11-13, where he is laying out five different gifts that God gives his church. These gifts are actually *people* that God has gifted and then given to the church to build it up and bring it to maturity and unity. (This is sometimes called **APEST** – Apostles, Prophets, Evangelists, Shepherds, Teachers. Search "Alan Hirsch APEST" for more.)

Paul's assumption is that the church needs to grow into the fullness of her identity in Christ, and that these five gifts are crucial to that happening. In other words, we *need* prophets in our churches if we're going to grow into maturity. The problem is that mature prophets don't grow on trees. Prophets normally come to our churches immature, in need of encouragement and shaping. How can we do this faithfully and effectively?

You might be a prophet if...

Before we talk about *immature* prophets, let's talk about prophets in general. How are they Christ's gift to the church? First of all, "prophets" can be a bit of a polarizing term. It's easy to think of Old Testament prophets with their fantastic visions and strange behavior. We can also imagine Nostradamus-like figures, predicting obscure happenings in a far-flung future. But a better way to think of prophets is that they are simply **people who are in touch with God's values and care a lot about whether people and organizations are living those out or not.**

Here are some signs of prophets in general:

- They often enjoy spending time alone with God and sense his heart clearly.
- They care deeply about values and integrity, and often sense before anyone else when an organization is drifting from "true north" in these areas.
- They are able to stand back from circumstances and get a clear picture of what's *really* going on underneath the surface.

- This clarity oftentimes enables them to come up with creative and innovative solutions that others don't see.
- They are outside-the-box thinkers, and tend to disrupt the status quo.
- They are future-oriented, and tend to see opportunities and dangers before everyone else.

I know this gift well because I am a prophet (still feels weird to say that). This is how I've operated in almost every team I've ever been part of. I ask questions that can disrupt the status quo, because I want things to be *better* and more aligned with (what I see as) God's values.

Signs of an immature prophet:

But prophets need to grow from immaturity to maturity, just like all of us. Their greatest strength is also their greatest weakness. In their relentless drive for *better*, they can make others feel inadequate and discouraged. They have trouble continuing to *move* and *act* on their convictions because they strive for perfection in everything. People feel like they can never "measure up" with a prophet, and that it's hard to disagree with them.

Here are some signs of an immature prophet:

- They talk about their perspective as though it was simply "the truth."
- Because they think they are the ones who really "get it," they can form elite cliques in churches that destroy unity.
- They jump from church to church because they keep finding problems in each.
- They become frustrated when their ideas aren't accepted and implemented immediately.
- They have to point out every inconsistency or problem they see. They can't hold their tongues.
- They have a hard time accepting people right where they're at.
- They tend to live in their heads, because their idealism is cleaner than the real-world messiness of ministry.
- They tend to isolate themselves or only associate with those who think like them.

Does that remind you of anyone? Maybe you notice these characteristics in yourself? One temptation we encounter with immature prophets is to *use them* for their ability to think strategically and their willingness to work hard. Immature prophets create a culture where people are trying to do the right thing, and it can be tempting to ignore their immaturity in order to keep everyone "motivated." But frankly, the easiest temptation is to simply *reject* an immature prophet, because **they can be some of the most annoying people you'll ever meet**. It's really easy to wish that immature prophets would just go away. I know leaders who have prayed for God to "move them on" because the criticism just would not stop!

But while some immature prophets will leave your church of their own accord (because you're doing it wrong), it's not loving or wise to *use them* or *reject them*. Instead, we learn to *disciple them*.

How do we disciple immature prophets when we find them in our churches?

In some ways, what prophets need to grow in discipleship is the same thing that everyone needs: **an abundance of both grace and truth**. We calibrate grace in discipleship by offering connection and

compassion in an authentic relationship. We calibrate truth in discipleship by holding *reality* in front of others non-anxiously.

This calibration looks different for a prophet than it does for an evangelist or apostle. The grace and truth they need takes on a certain shape.

Offering grace to an immature prophet

Here are a few things I've learned about offering *grace* to an immature prophet:

- Prophets need space in their schedule for **prayer and connection with God**. Affirm this and help them make space for it.
- Similarly, prophets need permission to **rest and retreat**. They tend to be “creatives” who need times of rest for their ideas to grow up.
- Prophets need to know their gift is important – **affirm them and what they're seeing**. The rejection they often receive because of their harshness is very painful, even if they don't realize it.
- Prophets need an atmosphere of **permission to get it wrong**. They need to know they won't be rejected if they share something immaturely or if they're wrong about something they were sure about.
- Prophets need **safe spaces to experiment**. Create a playful, no-pressure environment.
- Prophets need **language that helps them qualify their revelations** as something God “might” be saying, rather than a “thus saith the Lord” approach.
- Prophets need to know they are **valued apart from their gifting**. That they don't *need* to “have a word from God” or know what to do to be valued in community.

Offering truth to an immature prophet

Here are a few notes on offering *truth* to an immature prophet:

- Prophets need to learn **empathy and patience** with those they disagree with. Challenge them to take the long view when it comes to discipleship.
- Prophets need to **submit their ideas and revelations to the community** for interpretation (1 Cor 14:26). The prophet can never be the sole interpreter of her message.
- Prophets will need training to help them **deliver their ideas with humility and grace**. Instead of “Thus saith the Lord!” try “I could be wrong, but what I sense God might be saying is...”
- Prophets need to be reminded that **they don't have the whole picture**. The interpretation and application of their revelation is for the *whole community* to discern.
- Prophets need to learn to **speak “Jesus truth” that sets people free**, instead of mere “fact truth” which can often bind people in fear and shame.
- Prophets need to remember that **they need the whole body of Christ**, that God is not just a “voice,” that the other gifts really matter.
- It's worth noting that the apostle and prophet gifts seem to work together well to establish and build new works. There seems to be something powerful about the apostle-prophet partnership that helps new things start.
- **Apostles without prophets** tend to be all frenetic and aimless energy that eventually drifts from the core vision. Prophets help to keep apostles on the “straight and narrow” with their inconvenient questions about why we're veering from the vision.

- **Prophets without apostles** tend to be endlessly tweaking their ideas until they're perfect, but there is a lack of movement. Apostles help prophets "get moving," and decide when things are "good enough," so we can launch something that will bless others.
- If you're an apostle, pray for a prophet to join you! They'll rub you the wrong way *every single day*, probably, but you need them.
- If you're a prophet, pray for an apostle to join you! It will be hard to deal with their relentless push for *movement*, but it will be a good kick in the pants for you.