

How To Disciple an Immature Shepherd (APEST Series)

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Have you ever noticed that some people seem to be wired up to *create a sense of family and belonging*? They're always creating safe environments for people to be real and find healing, and can't help but care deeply about others. They are empathetic, have a lot of patience for other people's brokenness and feel an impulse to help others.

They typically are found helping the congregation to love and encourage one another. These are people the Bible calls **shepherds** (or "pastors,"), and they're great! But they can also be so focused on cultivating harmony within a group that the group never grows, especially if they're *immature* in their gifting. It's important for us as leaders to be able to recognize the immature shepherds among us, and disciple them to maturity so they can fulfill their ministry in the Body of Christ.

But discipling a shepherd is a lot different than discipling someone gifted in another way, so let's talk about the unique challenges and opportunities of discipling immature shepherds.

Five gifts for the church

The way I'm using the word "shepherd" comes from the Apostle Paul 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* shepherds in our churches if we're going to grow into maturity. The problem is that mature shepherds don't grow on trees. Shepherds normally come to our churches immature, in need of encouragement and shaping. How can we do this faithfully and effectively?

You might be a shepherd if...

Before we talk about *immature* shepherds, let's talk about shepherds in general. How are they Christ's gift to the church? First of all, the terminology can be confusing because shepherds are also called "pastors," which we typically use to describe any leader in a church. So a "pastor" could be any of the five giftings... so to reduce the amount of confusion, I'm using the term "shepherd" to talk about this within the framework of fivefold ministry in Ephesians 4.

Shepherds are those who **are motivated to care for the spiritual well-being and growth of the church**. JR Woodward calls them "Soul Healers," people whose primary concern is "helping people to pursue wholeness and holiness."

Here are some signs of shepherds in general:

- They really care deeply about people (apostles tend to care about “the big picture” and how the whole group is doing, but shepherds notice and stop to care for individuals in the church).
- They tend to create a safe environment for people to be real and find healing, moving them from their false selves toward authentic community.
- They create a sense of family and belonging, helping the congregation to love one another, encourage one another, exhort one another, get along with each other, comfort one another, as well as play with one another.
- They seem to have an innate ability to empathize with the pain of others, and people typically experience them as great listeners.
- They tend to dislike conflict and pursue relational harmony.
- They tend to focus on cultivating community within the church (in contrast to evangelists, who primarily think about those outside the church).
- They have a lot of patience for other people’s brokenness and feel an impulse to help others.
- They are very committed to protecting values and principles within a church or organization.
- They easily perceive how organizational actions or initiatives will affect the people involved.

But shepherds need to grow from immaturity to maturity, just like all of us. Their greatest strength is also their greatest weakness.

Here are some signs of an immature shepherd:

- In their care for individual people, they lose track of the bigger picture of being on mission and create a false dichotomy between building community and living on mission.
- They take up other people’s offenses, especially toward authority figures.
- They are so focused on cultivating harmony within a group that the group never grows and ends up becoming a “holy huddle” of insiders.
- They have trouble setting boundaries and can adopt a “savior complex” toward broken people, spending an inordinate amount of time obsessing about certain relationships.
- Because they don’t like conflict, they are unwilling to bring any kind of challenge or truth to people who need it, for the sake of “relational harmony.”
- They assume any new initiative that will potentially cause discomfort for people must be “bad” and will oppose it in a knee-jerk fashion.
- Because they are so transformation-oriented they can resist movement in the church because “we’re not ready.”

Does any of this remind you of anyone? Maybe you’ve got an immature shepherd in your church. Maybe you notice these characteristics in yourself? There’s a lot of movement and change in any church. You need shepherds in your church who can take the relational pulse of the community and cultivate harmony as you move.

If you notice an immature shepherd in your midst, one of the temptations will be to simply *use* them as a “good cop” who can help comfort those who are struggling with change in your church plant. And because immature pastors tend to lack boundaries, they’ll spend a crazy amount of time and energy trying to please you and care for the hurting! You might also experience shepherds as people who “slow

you down” (especially if you’re an apostle!), so it can be tempting to *reject* an immature shepherd as someone who isn’t “on board.” But immature shepherds need to be disciplined, not used or rejected.

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

In some ways, what shepherds 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 shepherd than it does for an apostle or prophet. The grace and truth they need takes on a certain shape.

Here are a few notes on bringing grace to a shepherd:

- **Listen to their insights** about how people are doing and what the culture of your church feels like.
- **Give them opportunities to lead** in environments where they’ll be able to bring wholeness to people’s lives over time.
- **Don’t ask them to move on from or multiply their group too quickly.** Give them time to cultivate safe environments where people can share deeply with one another.
- **Ask them to tell stories of transformation** in their groups during church gatherings.
- **Express that you value them for who they are**, not what they can do. Relationships are foundational for them, and if they feel like a “function,” they’ll quickly become resentful.
- **Proclaim their identity in Christ to them often** because they are prone to being attacked in the realm of their identity.
- **Back them up when they need to say “No” to people for the sake of good boundaries.**
- **Offering truth to an immature shepherd**

Here are a few notes on bringing truth to an immature shepherd:

- They are often highly self-critical, so recognize that **you may not need to bring them nearly as much challenging truth as you think.**
- Shepherds need to embrace boundaries, but it’s hard for them because they feel like they’re abandoning people. **Help them understand how enmeshment works** and how sometimes the best thing we can do for people is let them experience the consequences of their choices.
- **Encourage them to invest in people** with the goal of spiritual reproduction, not just spiritual growth.
- **Encourage them to have an apprentice at all times**, someone that is learning to shepherd like they shepherd, so they can pass along what they know how to do.
- **Help them embrace movement and mission**, even if it means that not everyone will go with us. Help them see places in the Gospels when Jesus had to “leave people behind” for the sake of being on mission with his Father.
- Shepherds can tend to create their own “little church” within the larger church, which can be a good thing, but it can turn into a bad thing if shepherds are allowed to simply do whatever they want in those groups. Insist on accountability for what is happening within groups.