



Equipping Disciples for Ministry as Kingdom Priests

24:14 Goal: Movement engagements in every unreached people and place by 2025 (30 months)

By **CURTIS SERGEANT**

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The Lord intends His Church to equip every disciple to listen to God and do what He says. This involves demonstrating and proclaiming the good news together as lifelong learners and teachers. Ephesians 4:11–13 shows this entails a cooperative effort by variously gifted leaders. First Peter 2:9 makes it clear this is for all followers of Christ. This is summarized below.

Train them to:

- Listen to God (Prophets: reproducing hearing/seeing)
- Do what He says (Apostles: reproducing empowerment/advance)

First prophets and apostles as a foundation (1 Cor. 12:27–28; Eph. 2:19–22) then ...

- Demonstrate and proclaim the good news (Evangelists: reproducing compassion)
- Together (Shepherds: reproducing unity/care)
- As lifelong learners and teachers (Teachers: reproducing learning/teaching)

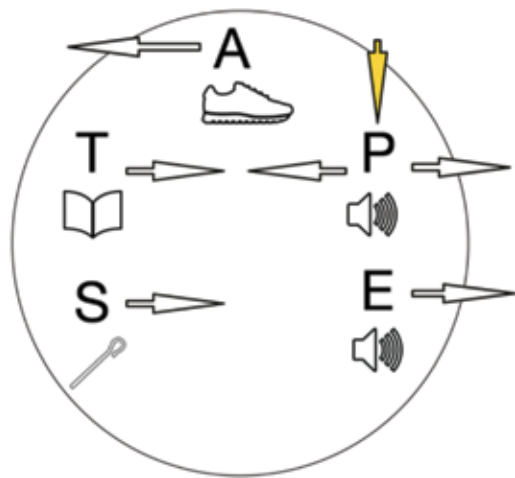
The recent history of Church Planting Movements (CPMs) and Disciple Making Movements (DMMs) has been heavily centered on the ministry of apostles and evangelists. Prophets, shepherds, and teachers have been less evident. This partly has been because apostles shaped how movements were presented and their approaches were sometimes unpalatable to those with the prophet, shepherd, and teacher gifts. Also, the prophets, shepherds, and teachers who did

seek to be involved often tried to do so in ways that were inappropriate for movement foundations and instead pursued more traditional ways to express their ministries.

An example of what a more balanced approach might look like can be seen in Neil Cole's excellent book *Primal Fire*. Neil has been emphasizing balanced collaboration among the APEST (Apostle, Prophet, Evangelist, Shepherd, Teacher) gifts for many years. Neil is primarily gifted as an apostle. His ministry in starting or advancing work in new areas has often been in close cooperation with the prophet on the team he serves with. Careful and intentional involvement of individuals with each of the APEST gifts has characterized his ministry.

I want to note that currently the term "apostle" is popularly used in ways other than what I am describing here, and which do not reflect what I consider biblically accurate usage. Apostles tend to be low-profile and despised and may even appear as weak (1 Cor. 4:8–13). This is because they focus on empowering and lifting up others and focus on not creating dependency. In contrast, some people today use the term "apostle" to indicate a powerful and prominent role.

Ephesians 4:11–13 describes the proper focus for expressing all five of the APEST gifts. Most significantly, the proper focus is to equip all believers to serve well in the various aspects of ministry, so that each person can function effectively as a kingdom priest (1 Pet. 2:9). In movements, this typically takes place at the city or regional (network) level of a movement and above.



The **circle** represents the Church in its larger expressions (city/regional or universal).

The **order** of the APEST letters around the clock face indicates the order in which they are typically needed.

The **"A"** represents apostles.

The **arrow beside the "A"** indicates the impetus is primarily toward those outside the Church.

The **shoe** represents the idea of going to new places or people groups.

The **"P"** represents prophets.

The **gold arrow** indicates God speaking to the prophets (to a special degree).

The **arrows beside the "P"** indicate there are messages both to the Church and to those outside the Church.

The **speaker symbols** below the "P" and "E" represent the communicative nature of the respective roles.

The **"E"** represents evangelists.

The **arrow beside the "E"** indicates the primary impetus is to those outside the Church.

The **"S"** represents shepherds.

The **arrow beside the "S"** indicates the primary impetus is toward those within the Church.

The **shepherd's crook symbol** represents a caring focus.

The **"T"** represents teachers.

The **arrow beside the "T"** indicates the primary impetus is toward those within the Church.

The **book symbol** represents a learning focus.

This is the same level at which the elder and deacon functions are normally expressed as well. Most often, the elders and deacons will also function in APEST roles, but others who are not elders or deacons will do so as well. These functions are not as visible at the individual house- or simple-church level, where the focus is more on the basics of hearing God and doing what He says. The broader equipping priority implies, though, that there are regular connections, communications, and collaborations among the churches of a given network. This city or regional aspect of movements cannot be ignored if the movements are to be healthy and growing.

A movement ideally begins with apostles and prophets (1 Cor. 12:27–28). This is because they are critical to establishing the DNA of the movement and the principles and patterns upon which the church is built (Eph. 2:19–22). That DNA affirms that being a disciple or follower of Jesus means following the pattern of listening to the Lord and doing what He says. Once that foundation has been established, everyone also needs to be equipped to demonstrate and proclaim the good news together as lifelong learners and teachers.

Each of the APEST gifts plays a critical role in this process. In the biblical order, this is what it looks like:

1. Apostles equip God's people by empowering them to advance the kingdom.
2. Prophets equip God's people to hear and see God's word and work by the Holy Spirit and Scripture.
3. Evangelists equip God's people to show compassion by demonstrating and proclaiming the good news in word and deed.
4. Shepherds equip God's people to build unity and to encourage and care for one another.
5. Teachers equip God's people to establish lifelong patterns of learning and teaching others.

In the kingdom as a whole in recent decades, people with different APEST gifts have tended to cluster in silos. This is understandable, since people with the same gifting tend to have similar styles and priorities. However, this is not how the Lord designed His body to work.

To establish new movements or to begin work among new people groups or in new places, A-P pairs are particularly important. The apostles tend to have a bias toward action, while prophets have a bias toward

listening. This often means the apostles and prophets are irritated by one another. Taking action to advance the kingdom is essential, but it needs to be in the right direction. These two functions need to work closely together. Apostles are often a sort of “jack of all trades, master of none” and thus may set out on their own rather than waiting around for prophets, whom they view as too slow to move or act. Prophets may be very quick and bold to speak, but they tend to move much more slowly in taking action. From another perspective, prophets tend to be fulfilled simply by hearing from the Lord generally, whereas apostles constantly want “actionable intel” that they can implement immediately.

Sometimes, once the foundations are laid, the apostles are ready to move on to the next frontier before the superstructure of leadership at the city or regional level has been added. When this is the case, the long-term growth and health of the movement can be hindered. From a coaching perspective, I use the establishment of 10 simple churches in an area as a rough indicator that it is time to consider appointing elders (and potentially deacons) for the city or regional church. This point is also when patterns of equipping by the APEST leaders should be on the agenda for continued growth and development.

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Especially in the early stages of a movement, many simple churches will not have anyone who meets the biblical qualifications to serve as an elder. Also, seldom if ever will all five of the APEST gifts be represented within a single simple church. Usually, by the time there are 10 or more churches, some people have emerged who qualify to serve as elders, and more people are coming to faith with a variety of the APEST gifts. At the city or regional level, these leaders can serve by equipping others in the larger expression of church.

What does it look like to equip all believers in a city or regional church in the various expressions of the APEST gifts? Most often, this takes the form of offering equipping opportunities across a number of

simple churches. There may be short periods of field ministry accompanied by brief instruction or training workshops. Typically, members of various simple churches come together for these times of equipping and then take on some responsibility for equipping others in their churches, resulting in a trickle-down effect. This same trickle-down pattern remains effective no matter how large the network of churches becomes, because it is scalable. Alternatively, there can be joint meetings of multiple simple churches explicitly for the purpose of equipping people in the APEST emphases. This can also be done electronically on any platform for ongoing communication within the larger expression of church (Zoom, Signal, WhatsApp, text messages, or a number of other options).

Moses’ organization of the people of Israel offers a good Old Testament parallel to this sort of city or regional structure. Leaders of 10 (families) were under leaders of 50, who were under leaders of 100, who were under leaders of 1,000, who were under the 70 elders, who were under Moses and Aaron. In movements, I advise having clusters of 4 to 12 at a given level. Leaders at each level can take responsibility for leaders below them and can also function as a peer support and accountability group with others at their level. In this way, no matter how large a movement grows, there can be both peer support and individual support from a leader above.

As a movement grows, the degree of trans-local equipping by APEST leaders can also increase. For this to be effective, however, a robust pattern of connection, communication, and collaboration must be in place. Otherwise, the trickle-down approach will not be effective in equipping all believers. This connection and collaboration can happen at every level: local, regional, national, international, and even global. Those who are tested and proven over time can begin to serve at the higher levels. As leaders, these APEST equippers enable all believers to serve in these various ways. That is how the body both grows and matures (Eph. 4:11–13).

Only Jesus functioned perfectly and maturely in all five aspects of APEST. The rest of us are on a journey to become more balanced and mature in our expression of these gifts. For example, my natural predisposition would most closely align with the patterns of the apostle. Secondly, I operate comfortably in the prophet and teacher roles. Over the years, I have grown in expressing

the shepherd role. My weakest aspect would definitely be in the role of the evangelist. I hope to continue to grow in each of these areas, including shoring up my relative weakness as an evangelist.

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When new work is being started, the functions of apostles and prophets should be dominant. Over time in a given location or movement, we can expect that the functions of the apostles would decrease and the functions of shepherds and teachers would increase. Likely, the functions of prophets and evangelists would remain somewhat consistent unless the percentage of disciples in the general population approached saturation, in which case the role of the evangelists would decrease as well. These changing levels of prominence could be apparent through different people coming into leadership, or else through the changing focus of the same leaders, if they have gifting in more than one of the APEST roles.

Who are New Testament examples of each of these roles?

Apostles: Paul. His emphasis on expanding and extending the kingdom to new people groups and places was a major focus of his efforts (Rom. 15:18–20).

Prophets: John. In Revelation, he spoke God's personalized message to several churches in Asia for that specific time (Rev. 2–3), as well as to God's people generally in the book as a whole.

Evangelists: Peter. He was moved to share the good news with those outside the kingdom both in public (Acts 2:14ff. and 3:11ff.) and private settings (Acts 10:34ff.), in large and small groups alike.

Shepherds: Barnabas was used to unite and encourage God's people consistently. Consider for example his work with Paul (Acts 9:26–27; 11:25–26), John Mark (Acts 12:25, 15:36–39), and generally in the Church (Acts 4:36–37; 11:19–23).

Teachers: Aquila and Priscilla. Consider how they taught Apollos to teach others (Acts 18:24–28).

What do immature expressions of these gifts look like?

Apostles: Immature apostles may forget to ensure the firm establishment of work they have helped to catalyze. It is possible to be mobile without abandoning ongoing development work. Stewarding the fruit is important.

Prophets: Immature prophets may be tempted to pride because they hear from the Lord more clearly. They may also be so focused on hearing that they forget to take practical action in response to what is heard.

Evangelists: Immature evangelists may minimize the cost of discipleship in their communications, in order to maximize the number of people who respond to the good news. They can become conversion-focused rather than discipleship-focused.

Shepherds: An immature shepherd may compromise in failing to call people to change or grow in the interest of encouraging people and seeking to maintain unity. This can end up sacrificing growth for comfort.

Teachers: Immature teachers may be tempted to pride because of their deeper insights into Scripture. They can be tempted to view themselves as irreplaceable and may treat teaching opportunities as performances.

What might it look like if we have only one of the APEST gifts functioning well in a movement?

Here are some extreme characterizations of the possible results:

Apostles: We would get (as we sometimes see today) continued but fragmented growth. United and cooperative action would be limited. Apostles acting alone may tend to only “move with the movers” and neglect people who are not actively engaged in advancing the kingdom.

Prophets: We would get a lot more listening and watching, but a lot less action. Growth would decrease significantly. Prophets acting alone can tend to listen far more than they act on what they have heard.

Evangelists: We would get continued growth, and maybe even faster growth for a while. However, depth of discipleship would suffer, and long-term growth would likely falter as well. Evangelists acting alone can tend to bring a lot of babies into the family who are then neglected.

Shepherds: We would have great morale, but growth would decrease dramatically. Everyone already inside the church would be well taken care of, but those outside would be largely neglected. Shepherds acting alone can tend to create an inward-focused ethos.

Teachers: We would have very knowledgeable disciples, not necessarily applying what they learned. Growth would slow dramatically, and pride would likely become a major problem. Teachers acting alone can tend toward a theoretical and academic approach as they teach about things that may go beyond relevance for the personal experience and application of their hearers.

How are each of these gifts ideally interdependent with the others?

Apostles: Apostles need to seek counsel from prophets to direct their efforts. Once they get their work established, they need to involve evangelists in communicating the good news more broadly and effectively in their field of service. They need to rely on shepherds to provide deeper levels of care and unity as the work grows, since this becomes more difficult as the work scales up. They need to rely on teachers, not only to enhance disciples' depth of understanding, but also to be more effective in passing on their insights and experiences to others.

Prophets: Prophets need to communicate with and be patient with apostles who have enthusiasm that may not always be aimed in the right direction. They must remember that without the apostles, new ground will not be gained effectively. They need to rely on evangelists, especially when they have a message for outside the church, because the evangelists are far more winsome in their communications. They need the shepherds for a similar reason when communicating within the church, because the shepherds can “translate” the message in such a way as not to discourage or divide the body more than necessary. They need teachers to help them communicate the truth they hear in a way that can be more effectively understood and passed on to others.

Evangelists: Evangelists need apostles to help establish foundations for them to build on as they reach out to new places or people groups who require more cross-cultural awareness and fluency. They need prophets to equip new followers of Christ in how to hear God more effectively on an ongoing basis. They need shepherds to provide ongoing encouragement and community

building for those whom they bring to the body. They need teachers to help take the new believers to continue to grow in an ongoing basis.

Shepherds: Shepherds need apostles to help keep the church growing beyond the families of those who are already followers of Christ. They need prophets to make sure the hard-to-hear messages that lead to further growth in Christ are shared. They need evangelists to help bring others into the body and to equip others to do the same. They need teachers to ensure continued growth of the disciples in understanding and in passing on what they are learning to others.

Teachers: Teachers need apostles to establish patterns of faithfulness in disciples, so they will apply what they learn and pass it on to others. They need prophets to keep disciples alert to hearing from the Spirit of God as well as the Word of God. They need evangelists to ensure there will always be more new believers to equip. They need shepherds to care for the disciples so that these disciples will be in a position of health and thus better able to learn and teach others.

It is essential for us to build on the foundation of the apostles and prophets so the basic pattern of hearing God and obeying Him is the basis for all that is done. Once that is happening, each of the gifts remains important for the healthy advance and expression of the kingdom.

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We need to pay attention to developing relationships within movements that lend themselves to ongoing practices of connecting, communicating, and collaborating—not just in silos based on specialization of spiritual gifts, but based on serving the entire Body of Christ. We then need to use these relationships to equip the entire Body of Christ in the whole array of APEST functions.

APEST in Prevailing-Model Churches

More familiar models of church can also have imbalances in expression of the APEST gifts. Most often, teachers and pastors are far more visible, active, and influential in

the ministry of such churches. In recent years, with the growth of megachurches, evangelists have also become more prominent in the local-church context. Prophets have typically been viewed as too politically incorrect, and apostles have been relegated to missions work.

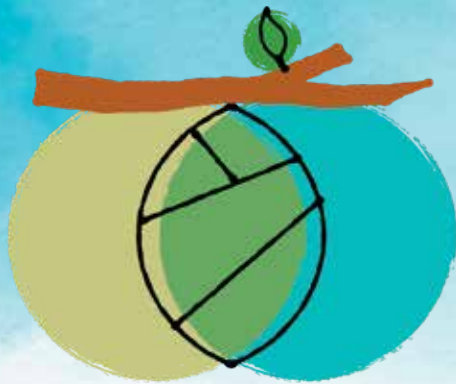
This analysis raises some interesting possibilities for possible interaction between movement-oriented churches and prevailing-model churches. In general, the strengths and patterns of emphasis are somewhat complementary between these two streams. Movement-oriented churches have emphasized apostles while prevailing-model churches have emphasized shepherds and teachers. Both have tended to give some role to evangelists, and both have largely under-utilized prophets.

Perhaps movement-oriented churches could “provide a home” for apostles from prevailing-model churches. They could provide an opportunity to utilize their gifts in a context that would welcome their contribution and an opportunity to work in a way that would seem natural to them. Since prevailing-model churches have already identified an abundance of shepherds and teachers,

those having these gifts often find somewhat limited opportunities to actively utilize their gifts. Movement-oriented churches could provide an opportunity to be more actively involved in ministry. This would first require some retraining on how to minister in an equipping manner, and on the apostolic-prophetic foundation of listening to God and doing what He says. Prevailing-model churches seem to offer less opportunity for innovative interaction with evangelists and prophets at this time.

Prevailing-model churches could perhaps benefit from an infusion of some of the apostolic foundations, especially in empowering all believers to be involved in kingdom ministry and having more of an equipping focus for all ministry done in and by churches in all aspects of APEST. This could mean having their people receive equipping from outside apostles.

I believe leaders in all types of churches would do well to consider the APEST functions, and ways to maximize the ministry and effectiveness of all five in the ministries the Lord has entrusted to them. 🌱



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