

**A BLENDED CHURCH MODEL:  
THE WAY FORWARD FOR THE AMERICAN CHURCH**

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**Introduction**

It is no surprise that while the traditional church<sup>1</sup> model is still the dominant model of the church in America that the number of house churches<sup>2</sup> has increased significantly in the last fifteen years. In 2003 there were 1600 house churches in the U.S. with official websites. George Barna estimates that as of 2009 there were as many as 30,000 house churches, with 6-12 million

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<sup>1</sup>J.D. Payne has offered a helpful definition of traditional church in his book *Missional House Churches: Reaching our communities with the Gospel*.

“In this study ‘traditional’ describes the generally held understanding of the local church. Traditional churches usually have Sunday morning as their primary time to gather. The Sunday worship gathering generally requires much time and energy to prepare for a one- or two-hour weekly event. For many such churches, the majority of their income is devoted to ministers’ salaries and physical properties. These churches tend to be campus-based in their identities. It is at these locations that the majority of their ministry events occur.

Traditional churches tend to be program-oriented, event-oriented, or categorically purpose-oriented in their identities. Pastoral leadership tends to be more positional in orientation and less relational. Evangelism is, many times, one program among many programs of the church and/or is primarily accomplished through the members inviting unbelievers to a worship service where the gospel is shared. The number of members usually far exceeds the number of people who gather weekly for worship and actively use their gifts and talents to build up the church. Many traditional churches identify themselves primarily in terms of their services, events, structures, buildings, and organizations.” (10)

<sup>2</sup>Payne describes house churches in general as, “More organic and less institutional, more simple and less structure, more participatory worship, and less passivity, more community and less acquaintances, and more ministers and less Ministers,” (40) Also house churches are distinguished from cell groups by the fact that they are autonomous.

Americans attending them. That number has continued to increase since 2009.<sup>3</sup> A recent survey in the city where our church is located, Raleigh, NC, revealed that only 25 percent of the population is interested in attending a religious service if invited.<sup>4</sup> If this is indicative of other U.S. cities, then it may be a difficult road ahead for traditional churches. While the house church movement is growing, and may one day be the predominate model of church in America, this is not the case in our day.

The purpose of this paper is not to argue for one model or the other, but to argue that a blended model may actually be most helpful for disciple making in the North American context. I am presently serving in a two-year old church plant, which is seeking to blend some aspects of each model with the goal of seeing a disciple making movement in our city.<sup>5</sup> This work will identify some of the deficiencies of the traditional model and offer some suggestions for traditional churches that desire to alter their DNA in hope of seeing more of their members engaged in disciple making.

Traditional churches seeking to make these shifts must first redefine ministry “success” in regard to discipleship. Second, they must strive to become more participatory in nature. Third, traditional churches need to identify and utilize all of the Ephesians 4 gifts (APEST<sup>6</sup>). Finally, traditional churches must seek ways to partner with, and not compete against, house churches. While there are many more shifts that need to be made, these will be the focus of this particular work. Before addressing these issues it is important to note that while there are not a great

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<sup>3</sup>The Barna Group. “How Many People Really Attend a House Church?” <https://www.barna.org/barna-update/organic-church/291-how-many-people-really-attend-a-house-church-barna-study-finds-it-depends-on-the-definition#.Vd94krQvtuU> (accessed August 27, 2015.)

<sup>4</sup>MissionInSite. [maps.missioninsite.com](http://maps.missioninsite.com) (accessed August 27, 2015).

<sup>5</sup><http://www.oakschurchraleigh.com>.

<sup>6</sup>Apostles, Prophets, Evangelists, Shepherds and Teachers. For more information on this concept see the Appendix.

number of churches seeking to blend these two models, we have been fortunate to learn from a few churches and leaders who are further down the road than we are.<sup>7</sup>

### **Biblical Basis For A Blended Model**

Before offering some practical steps for traditional churches it is important to first ask the question, “Why move to a blended model?” Perhaps the most basic answer to this question is that the New Testament does not force us to choose. George Patterson states, “Wise disciples discern three levels of authority for church activities.”<sup>8</sup> First, we must ask whether or not there are any clear New Testament commands from Jesus and his apostles concerning which model of church we should adopt. A survey of the New Testament does not reveal any commands concerning this topic.

Second, we must ask if there are any New Testament practices that support a particular model and determine whether or not these are normative practices for the church in our day. It does appear that when Jesus was with those closest to him he preferred to be in homes. Also the New Testament is filled with references to churches meeting in homes.<sup>9</sup> While it appears that the church got its start in the home, the Bible also speaks about believers gathering for worship in the synagogue (Acts 2:46). The cultural context of the early church appears to be a major reason why they began meeting in homes. The young church did not have an abundance of resources and was also facing persecution as well. With that said, David Garrison is correct when he

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.graceatstate.org>; <http://www.ctrmemphis.com>; <http://www.onwardchurch.org>; <http://citychurchmovement.com>.

<sup>8</sup> George Patterson & Richard Scoggins, *Church Multiplication Guide: The Miracle of Church Reproduction* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library. 2002). 28-29

<sup>9</sup> David Garrison, *Church Planting Movements: How God Is Redeeming a Lost World* (Arkadelphia, AR: WIGTake Resources, 2004), 213.

writes, “When the church left the home, it left something vital behind: intimate contact with every fact of daily life.”<sup>10</sup>

Finally, human traditions serve as the final level of authority. This is significant to our discussion because the house church movement is challenging some long standing human traditions that are firmly fixed in the traditional model such as: large buildings, elaborate worship, many members, professional and paid church staff, specific styles of sermons and lectures, preparing leaders in an academic institution outside of the church, high profile, institutional mission agencies, and ordination prerequisites that go beyond what Scripture requires.<sup>11</sup> Luke, in Acts 2:42-47, presents a beautiful, and simplistic, picture of what the church is and what it must hold onto in every context that it exists. Human traditions must constantly be evaluated in light of whether they are cultivating a context of disciple making.

It is also important for traditional churches to realize that this model cannot survive persecution, and that this is becoming more of a possibility for the church in America. Although one of these days the traditional model may be a thing of the past, the fact remains that in our present context it is still contextual. Even though the house church movement is growing, there are many believers and unbelievers who are unable and unwilling to make the change. A blended model helps connect us with the past, while preparing us and equipping the church for the future. The reality is that both models have strengths and both have weaknesses. The remainder of this work will examine some of the weaknesses of the traditional model (because that is the context in which this paper is being written), while offering some suggestions of how traditional churches can incorporate some of the strengths of house churches for the sake of discipleship and church planting.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 214.

<sup>11</sup> Patterson & Scoggins, Church Multiplication Guide, 30.

## Necessary Steps For Traditional Churches To Transition To A Blended Model

How do we determine the progress, or success, of a local church? Is this done by large numbers on Sunday, a nice facility, a diversity of ministry programs, high percentages of participation in weekly small groups, or a commitment to international missions? While the New Testament does not mandate a particular model of church, it does make it clear that successful and healthy churches are filled with disciples of Jesus who are making disciples. The dangerous assumption by many traditional churches is that any well intentional effort by the church constitutes discipleship. There is a temptation to assume that every sermon, every small group meeting, or every Bible study will produce disciples who make disciples.

Jesus' clearest command to "make disciples" is found in Matthew 28:16-20. While attempting to highlight the significance of this command for the church, one commentator describes this passage as, "The climax and major focal point not only of this gospel but of the entire New Testament."<sup>12</sup> Not only does this passage teach that discipleship is the heartbeat of the church, but it also defines what biblical disciple making is. The command to "make disciples" in V19 is surrounded by the three participles: going, baptizing, and teaching. David Platt, in his commentary on this text, lists the non-negotiable facets of disciple making.<sup>13</sup> First disciple making requires that we share the Gospel with those who are lost among all of the world's people groups.<sup>14</sup> A 2012 Lifeway study revealed that 61 percent of Christians have not shared the Gospel with anyone in the past six months.<sup>15</sup> If church members are not sharing their faith, then discipleship is not taking place. The second part of disciple making is that we show

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<sup>12</sup> John MacArthur, *Matthew 24-28. The MacArthur New Testament Commentary Series* (Chicago, IL:Moody, 1987), 329.

<sup>13</sup> David Platt, *Christ-Centered Exposition: Exalting Jesus in Mathew* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing, 2013) 375-376.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 375.

<sup>15</sup> (<http://www.lifeway.com/Article/research-survey-sharing-christ-2012>)

the Word. For new believers this begins with baptism and continues to include all that happens when we walk through life together as a community of faith. Discipleship involves showing new believers how to pray, study God's Word, grow in Christ, and how to lead others to Christ.<sup>16</sup> Again, if church members are not baptizing new believers and showing them what it means to follow Jesus, discipleship is not taking place. Third, discipleship includes teaching new believers to obey the Word.<sup>17</sup> If new believers do not know and obey what Christ has commanded in the Word concerning holiness and mission, discipleship is not taking place.

Traditional churches must determine success by whether or not its members are walking with Jesus and reproducing themselves. Platt comments, "We may come to a worship service, participate in the life of the church, serve in the church, and give regularly, all the while neglecting to make disciples. The church is filled with people who have been Christians for 5, 10, 15, or even 50 years, who have never led someone outside of their family to be a reproducing disciple. We have missed our mission."<sup>18</sup>

In 2 Timothy 2:2 Paul exhorts and encourages Timothy, saying, "And what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also." Paul is nearing the end of his life and is describing what matters most in ministry as he writes to the young pastor. Paul encourages Timothy to pursue generational discipleship. In his mind, minimal ministry success is defined by four generations of discipleship. What if we evaluated all of our church traditions in light of this goal of fourth generation discipleship? Are there any examples of fourth generation discipleship in our churches? Church leaders need to honestly assess whether or not this type of discipleship is taking place and be open to simplifying and eliminating many of the "good" church activities

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<sup>16</sup> Platt, Matthew, 376.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 374.

that use up our time and resources. In a healthy church members will hold one another accountable to sowing Gospel seeds, modeling obedience, and teaching new believers to know and be obedient to the commands of Jesus.

If traditional churches are going to be more effective in disciple making they must become more participatory in nature. One argument against house churches is that traditional churches, because they are generally larger in size, have a greater diversity of spiritual gifts than house churches do. While this may be true, it does not guarantee that the majority of the gifts available to the church are being used. Spiritual gifts are given to every follower of Jesus in order to empower them to build up the body of Christ and extend the Kingdom of Christ throughout the world. One might also argue that spiritual gifts are given primarily for discipleship. The apostle Peter highlights the “priestly” role of every church member to minister to believers and the lost world when he writes, “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, and people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you...” (1 Peter 2:9) Why do we continue to let so many spiritual gifts go uncultivated and unused?

Spiritual gifts get neglected when churches value *attracting lost people*, rather than *intentionally seeking them*. This “come and see” approach often displays and utilizes the gifts of a few, but neglects the gifts of the majority. Michael Goheen suggests that consumerism has influenced the church in America more than it realizes, and he suggests that the western church has forgotten its biblical role and “Has capitulated to the idols of its surrounding culture.”<sup>19</sup> Perhaps this is most evident in the Sunday gathering. Many traditional churches rightly teach members that they are God’s instruments for disciple making, but passively undercut this teaching when much more time and resources are invested in making a Sunday a success instead

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<sup>19</sup> Michael W. Goheen, *A Light To the Nations: The Missional Church and the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 5, 15-16.

of making members successful disciple makers throughout the week. This consumeristic approach to church must be stripped away, no matter what Sunday traditions it may cost the church. If we are not faithfully making disciples who make disciples, we will lose these traditions in several generations anyway.

A blended church must value the meaningful participation of members any time the church gathers together. This begins with creativity, and change, in the Sunday gathering. The early church was committed to Jesus, the Bible, and the ordinances. They gave their time, talents, treasures, and spiritual gifts for the sake of one another and for making disciples among the nations. We must hold tightly to these things on Sundays, but there is complete freedom when determining how we are faithful to them. Why does one individual do most of the preaching, or lead most of the music? Why are sermons monologues? Why can we not take time in the middle, or at the end to discuss and dialogue about the sermon? Why are there not more opportunities for members to pray together, confess sin, reflect on the past week, and make plans for the next week in regard to personal holiness and mission? Why is the corporate gathering the only place baptism and the Lord's Supper occur? Why do we not engage in more corporate fasting? Why do we not regularly pray for the sick among us in the service? Why are there people in the church who have never served the children? There are countless ways for churches to provide opportunities for more meaningful participation, so why do we not? Is it because consumerism is ingrained in us and in our churches? A more participatory corporate gathering may make some members uncomfortable, or it could deter guests from returning. When these fears dictate the nature of our gathering, then it is a good indicator that at its heart the church is more committed to a "come and see," rather than a "go and tell" model."

A blended model of church will strive to recognize and utilize all of the gifts described in Ephesians 4:11. Here Paul writes, "And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the

shepherds, and the teachers, to equip the saints for the work of the ministry...”<sup>20</sup> These gifts are not greater than the other spiritual gifts listed in the Scripture, but they do need to be given special attention. Without the recognition and use of these particular gifts, the saints will not be equipped for the work of the ministry. In traditional churches the gifts of shepherd and teacher are recognized and utilized the most, because these are the gifts that many church leaders possess. The gift of apostle is the most neglected gift in the traditional church, either due to ignorance on the subject or to an interpretation of Ephesians 4:11 that teaches these gifts no longer exist in our day.

In Acts 14:4 Paul uses the term ‘apostles’ to describe, not just Paul, but his missionary team. (4,14) John Stott commenting on this verse writes:

The attribution of the title ‘apostle’ to Barnabas as well as Paul, both here and in verse 14, is perplexing, until we remember that the word is used in the New Testament in two senses. On the one hand, there were the ‘apostles of Christ’, personally appointed by him to be witnesses of the resurrection, who include the Twelve, Paul and probably James. There is no evidence that Barnabas belonged to this group. On the other hand, there were the ‘apostles of the church’, sent out by a church or churches on particular missions, as Epaphroditus was an apostle or messenger of the Philippian church. So too Paul and Barnabas were both apostles of the church of Syrian Antioch, sent out by them, whereas only Paul was also an apostle of Christ.<sup>21</sup>

While making a thorough argument for the present day existence of the APEST gifts is not the purpose of this work, Stott’s comments are important to our discussion.<sup>22</sup> The gift of apostle today must not be confused with the office of apostle, which was limited to those who saw the risen Christ. Today there are only apostles, like Barnabas, who are recognized and sent

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<sup>20</sup> Appendix 1.

<sup>21</sup> John Stott, *The Message of Acts: To the Ends of the Earth* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990) 229.

<sup>22</sup> For more thorough arguments, especially for the need of apostles in the traditional church see: *Loving The Church: Blessing The Nations*, George Miley; *A Vision of the Possible*, Daniel Sinclair; *Apostolic Church Planting: Birthing New Churches from New Believers*, J.D. Payne, <http://www.theforgottenways.org/apest/>; <http://www.releaseotheape.com/ephesians-4/>.

out by the church for the advancement of Christ's Kingdom. While the traditional church has typically sent these individuals out as missionaries to foreign lands, it has largely neglected to utilize them within the church in order to equip the saints to reach "Jerusalem." Apostles in a traditional church often challenge and threaten the status quo and can cause a level of discomfort for shepherds and teachers. Many apostles who do not go overseas end up working in para-church organizations or starting house churches. The traditional church desperately needs apostles if it has any hope of making disciples with the intentionality that the New Testament demands.

Apostles also desperately need the body of Christ. They need shepherds to challenge them towards spiritual maturity and teachers to guard them against pragmatism and to ensure the disciples they are making are being trained in the whole counsel of God's Word. House churches often attract and are led by apostles who are frustrated with the lack of disciple making in the traditional church. House churches need these gifts just as much as traditional churches. Without shepherds and teachers the attrition rate for house churches will be higher. The point is that when any of these gifts are not recognized and utilized in a church then that church will be unbalanced in its ministry of making disciples who are passionate about holiness and mission.

In a blended church model how are these gifts utilized? When care is taken to assess and identify individuals with APEST gifts, it is important to gather those individuals together into teams that meet together to encourage one another and to brainstorm about how they might be able to use their gifts in the church to better equip the saints for the work of the ministry.

One way for traditional churches to utilize members with these gifts is to have a vision for planting house churches. Today, many traditional churches have a small group ministry. While this has addressed many neglected issues of discipleship, especially pertaining to transparency and accountability in regard to holiness, it has not necessarily led to more disciples

being made, based on the understanding of discipleship in this work. Oftentimes leadership in these groups reflects the leadership of the church. Shepherds and teachers are appointed as leaders and are concerned primarily with the internal spiritual health of the group and not the outward expansion of the group. Just like in the corporate gathering, discipleship must be redefined in small groups as well. Small groups must also be given the autonomy to function as churches and become churches if they so desire. They should be allowed to baptize new believers and take the Lord's Supper. Accountability in holiness must be balanced by accountability to mission and multiplication. The identification and appointment of the initial qualified leaders would be a joint effort between the group's members and the leadership of the church.

In addition to giving small groups more autonomy, traditional churches should form apostolic teams, much like the church in Antioch did with Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:1-3). These teams should be lead by apostles and exist solely to make disciples and plant churches. Daniel Sinclair believes that apostles with the gifts of leadership, teaching, and faith are ideal to lead these teams.<sup>23</sup> Concerning Paul's apostolic teams George Miley makes four key observations. First, he believes "Paul's apostolic teams were one with the local church... They were seamlessly integrated into the fellowship of believers. They blended in. The church was their family. They had been formed within it. They understood it. They were part of its leadership. They had come from it for the purpose of advancing the kingdom into new areas, or, in other words, to start new churches."<sup>24</sup> Second, "Paul's apostolic teams had an identity separate

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<sup>23</sup> Daniel Sinclair, *A Vision Of the Possible: Pioneer Church Planting Teams* (Waynesboro, GA: Authentic, 2005) 48.

<sup>24</sup> George Miley, *Loving the Church and Blessing the Nations: Pursuing the Role of the Local Churches in Global Mission* (Waynesboro, GA: Authentic Media, 2003), 143.

from the local church...”<sup>25</sup> Paul and his team were free to start new churches, be a part of those churches, and leave whenever the Holy Spirit called them to leave those churches. Third, Paul’s apostolic teams were called to a different kind of ministry than the local church.”<sup>26</sup> Not everybody in the church has the time or the gifts to pursue full time Kingdom expansion work like Paul’s teams did. Individuals with work, family, and other responsibilities must still be faithful to make reproducing disciple, but it will not look the same way that it did for Paul. Fourth, Paul’s apostolic teams were a different kind of organizational structure than a local church. (147) They made their own decisions, were responsible for their own funding, did their own recruiting, operated in a broad and diverse geographic area, and appointed qualified leaders over the churches they planted. (148)

For years many traditional churches have planted traditional churches by sending out pastors as the church planters. While this has been an excellent advance in Christ’s Kingdom, it is often slow, costly, and difficult to reproduce. In a blended church model apostolic teams would be sent out to plant churches, and the future leaders of the church would come from the harvest field that the church was planted in. This model of church planting seems more faithful to the apostolic model set forth in the New Testament.

Perhaps the greatest strength of a blended model is that it removes much of the animosity and competition between proponents of each model, and it establishes a bridge for healthy partnership. Presently, in our North American context, both models are necessary if we are going to see a disciple making movement take place. This work has focused on some ways traditional churches can learn and blend some of the strengths of the house church movement into its

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<sup>25</sup> Miley, 144.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 147.

existing structures. This final section will focus on some of the strengths of the traditional church and offer ways it may use these to partner with and build up house churches.

Two strengths of the traditional church model are the corporate gathering and the proclamation of the Word. Larger gatherings of the church give us a glimpse and longing for heaven. We long for the day when a multitude from every tribe, tongue, and nation will worship Jesus. It is difficult for a house church to get this vision when there are only 15-20 individuals gathered for worship. As a traditional church plants house churches, perhaps it would be encouraging to invite everyone to worship together several times a year. This would truly be a special time of worship, fellowship, encouragement, and motivation for all of the local churches involved. This intentionality in meeting should also happen among pastors of traditional churches and house churches. This would serve as a wonderful opportunity for edification, learning, and discipleship. It would also help guard against heresy in house churches with inexperienced leadership.

Another weakness in the house church movement is the lack of opportunities for those with the gifts of teaching and preaching. These opportunities could come within traditional churches in Sunday School classes, doctrinal and topical classes, evangelistic meetings, or in the corporate gathering. In whatever way it occurs, we must find ways for those in house churches, with these gifts, to utilize them.

Another challenge for house churches is how will they engage in international missions. How will they train, send, and support missionaries overseas? Involvement in international missions requires resources, which most house churches do not have. This is another opportunity for partnership. Perhaps a portion of house churches offerings could go to a larger traditional church specifically for Gospel work overseas.

Finally, while most house churches are not interested in expensive and expansive programs for children, there are some things that traditional church can offer that are helpful. There are individuals in the body of Christ that are passionate and gifted in teaching and engaging children. Also, at times, children need to be around other children their age. In some house church contexts, this is not happening as often as it should. As traditional and house churches partner together, other creative ideas will be birthed that will only serve to advance the Kingdom of Jesus. Humble partnership, for the sake of the Kingdom, will help address the weaknesses of each model and take advantage of the strengths.

This work has argued that a blended church model may be the most effective church model for disciple making in the current American context. It keeps the church connected to the past while preparing and equipping the it for the future. In order for traditional churches to become more effective in disciple making they must redefine discipleship, become more participatory, recognize and utilize the APEST gifts, and pursue humble partnership with house churches. Ultimately these changes require a church, and its leaders, to put the Kingdom of Jesus before their own personal kingdom. It may cost churches, numbers, buildings, and paid positions, but the potential for kingdom impact is much greater when every church member is a disciple who is making disciples.

## Appendix

### Defining the Ephesians 4 Gifts

**APOSTLES** extend the gospel. As the “sent ones,” they ensure that the faith is transmitted from one context to another and from one generation to the next. They are always thinking about the future, bridging barriers, establishing the church in new contexts, developing leaders, networking trans-locally. Yes, if you focus solely on initiating new ideas and rapid expansion, you can leave people and organizations wounded. The shepherding and teaching functions are needed to ensure people are cared for rather than simply used.

**PROPHETS** know God's will. They are particularly attuned to God and his truth for today. They bring correction and challenge the dominant assumptions we inherit from the culture. They insist that the community obey what God has commanded. They question the status quo. Without the other types of leaders in place, prophets can become belligerent activists or, paradoxically, disengage from the imperfection of reality and become other-worldly.

**EVANGELISTS** recruit. These infectious communicators of the gospel message recruit others to the cause. They call for a personal response to God's redemption in Christ, and also draw believers to engage the wider mission, growing the church. Evangelists can be so focused on reaching those outside the church that maturing and strengthening those inside is neglected.

**SHEPHERDS** nurture and protect. Caregivers of the community, they focus on the protection and spiritual maturity of God's flock, cultivating a loving and spiritually mature network of relationships, making and developing disciples. Shepherds can value stability to the detriment of the mission. They may also foster an unhealthy dependence between the church and themselves.

**TEACHERS** understand and explain. Communicators of God's truth and wisdom, they help others remain biblically grounded to better discern God's will, guiding others toward wisdom, helping the community remain faithful to Christ's word, and constructing a transferable doctrine. Without the input of the other functions, teachers can fall into dogmatism or dry intellectualism. They may fail to see the personal or missional aspects of the church's ministry.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Alan Hirsch. “*APEST Descriptions.*” <http://www.theforgottenways.org/apest/> (accessed August 28, 2015).

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