

Chapter 5

SHEPHERD TOWARD SPIRITUAL MATURITY

Elk are incredible animals. I have spent the better part of 25 years watching, studying, and hunting them. In my opinion, they are one of God's most magnificent creations. Every year, through these large, powerful animals, God teaches me something new about himself, his creation, or even myself.

The fifth guardrail principle for a disciple making church is to shepherd people toward spiritual maturity. Believe it or not, while I was bow hunting one time, a female elk taught me a tremendous lesson about shepherding people.

I was pressing through some of the most awful brush that the North Idaho forest has to offer. I was climbing, groaning, and whining out loud as I made my way through the dense trees and bushes. I stumbled across a huge herd that had been using the thick brush for cover. Instantly, the elk I had approached bolted in every direction. I hadn't seen them leave, but branches shook and snapped all around me as the herd scattered, letting me know they were gone. My prey had left. So instinctively, I stopped and put my elk call in my mouth and began to call out as if I were a lost calf elk. I was essentially pleading for the herd to come back and save me. I was hoping they would

come close enough for me to take a shot with my bow. To my surprise, a huge female elk came running toward me. She called to me and circled the area around me, trying to locate me, convinced that I was a poor little calf lost in the brush. She knew it was important to keep calves close to the herd. She stomped her hoof, trying to ward off predators, and beckoned me to follow her. It's like she couldn't tell I was a human! It was not until I literally waved my arms at her that she gave up and ran back to the herd.

I learned something about shepherding in the church from my encounter with that female elk. Jesus is the great shepherd, and in Scripture we are taught that every believer should shepherd others toward spiritual maturity. In the church, we are to look through a lens that causes us to see people with the same care and concern that Jesus does. The elk provides a great analogy for us. Because the female elk was concerned for the calf elk's health and safety, she shifted her focus to intentionally seek out and encourage the calf. Likewise, we must understand that the spiritual health and safety of those around us should be our concern. We are commanded in Scripture to encourage each other daily (Hebrews 3:12-14).

To effectively encourage someone daily and press them toward Christ, we must be in proximity to them. Sadly, in church today we have put so much emphasis on what happens on Sunday morning that we have followed the culture into a world of loneliness. We have not learned the importance of keeping people close, much like the female elk sought to keep her calf close in my story. We have left people to fend for themselves while believing we are succeeding because we can produce an entertaining Sunday morning. Sundays are vital, but they can never take the place of the proximity needed to shepherd someone toward maturity.

Unfortunately, we sometimes view maturity in Christ as having

a strong education or thorough Bible knowledge. Bible knowledge is important and I encourage you to train your staff, leaders, and church members in solid doctrinal principles, but just because someone knows the facts doesn't mean they apply them to their life. That's why becoming mature takes shepherding.

Discipleship is a process where we follow the Holy Spirit's leading as we help each other to be more like Christ. We take knowledge from Scripture and live it out in real life, learning to love others as Jesus loves us and care for others as he cares for us.

Whether you are a pastor, an elder, or a small group leader, if you follow Christ, you are called to help people grow in spiritual maturity. Without this guardrail in the church we can never remain on track toward leading people to spiritual growth. Without it, we forget what it means for the church to win. Winning is making disciples, and making disciples cannot happen if we do not intentionally shepherd people into spiritual maturity.

READ

Open your Bible and read John 21:15-18.

REFLECT

Ask yourself these questions:

1. Who am I discipling toward spiritual maturity? How am I leading that person to spiritual maturity?
2. What am I doing to intentionally disciple my team?

Stay the Course

3. What changes can I make to help create a shepherding culture in our church?

ACT

Identify one individual who you can begin intentionally shepherding.