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Bruce B. Miller

Your Church in Rhythm

The Forgotten Dimensions of Seasons and Cycles

What Time Is It in Your Church?

A Leadership  Network Publication

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PART ONE

**Identifying What
Time It Is in
Your Church**

1

Why Do Church in Rhythm?

If you are like me, you understand the feeling of wanting it all now. I want to be spiritually healthy. I'm sick to death of sinning. And I feel the same way about our church: I want it to be mature this week. I'm sick of our church's sin, dysfunction, and immaturity. My aim is for every ministry to be the best it can be. My heart is for us to be a praying, giving, worshipping, teaching, evangelizing, missional, community-impacting, global, loving, discipling church right now. It's not a bad dream, but I can drive my team, our people, and myself crazy with it. We beat ourselves up about what we are not doing or not doing well enough. On biblical measures of a good church and I want us to score well (actually at the top) on every scale, every year.

Some would ask what's wrong with this. It sounds noble. But it is an artificial idealism that ignores the reality of life cycles. It does not recognize our unique identity as a particular local church or this unique time in the life of our church. If we lead our churches to focus on every aspect of a mature church at every moment, it will hurt them. It will put undue pressure on people, piling on unnecessary guilt in the pursuit of an impossible goal. It will diminish our effectiveness because our efforts

become diffuse, and it will rob us of joy because we are not celebrating what is going well.¹ There is a better way to do church.

I have claimed that a rhythm approach makes ministry more effective and enjoyable, but does the Bible have anything to say about rhythm? Do we see this idea working anywhere else outside the Bible? Is this a natural principle evident in the world? Will it enhance ministry? Is rhythm practical or is this just some interesting idea? We'll explore answers to these questions in this chapter.

A BIBLICAL SENSE OF TIME

We begin here by looking at *kairos* and *chronos* in biblical theology. God created *chronos* cycles when he made the world. They are rooted in the created order. In contrast, *kairos* rhythms flow from providence in the course of life. Genesis Chapter One and Ecclesiastes Chapter Three demonstrate these two types of rhythm. The account of creation establishes the five fundamental *chronos* cycles that order our temporal environment: annual, quarterly, lunar, weekly, and daily rhythms. King Solomon's famous poem artistically describes *kairos* seasons that we are to embrace as they come.²

In Ecclesiastes 3:1–8, Solomon portrays a rhythmic approach to life. In fourteen couplets, each a pair of opposites, he covers a wide range of human activity. Twenty-eight times, the word *time* is repeated as Solomon makes the point that God gives us rhythms by which we are to live, each appropriate to a unique season of our experience.

There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity
under heaven:

a time to be born and a time to die,
a time to plant and a time to uproot,
a time to kill and a time to heal,
a time to tear down and a time to build,
a time to weep and a time to laugh,
a time to mourn and a time to dance,

a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them,
a time to embrace and a time to refrain,
a time to search and a time to give up,
a time to keep and a time to throw away,
a time to tear and a time to mend,
a time to be silent and a time to speak,
a time to love and a time to hate,
a time for war and a time for peace.

Although it is common to use Solomon's poem to validate balance, it does not support the theory that we should aim for a "balanced" life. Solomon is not saying to hold all activities in balance in each season, but rather to realize that different seasons call for different activities in a rhythm. For instance, he writes, "A time to tear down and a time to build." Obviously, one does not tear down and build at the same time. Instead he is saying there are times to tear down and different times to build.

The Hebrew word *time* as used here refers to more than chronological time; it refers to an occasion or season of time. *Kairos* describes experienced time, an opportune moment. Solomon challenges us that keeping and throwing away, loving and hating are not to be held in balance simultaneously but are to be fully expressed rhythmically at different times. When it is time to love your neighbor, love with all your heart; when it is time to hate injustice, hate it passionately. Live full out.

The poem opens with the most momentous events of human life: its beginning and its end—a time to be born and a time to die. We and every other living creature have a specific life span. Within the brackets of birth and burial come pairs of creative and destructive activities, private and public emotions. These are not times we choose, but ones we accept. The Anchor Bible commentary says: "Indeed, people do not decide when to heal, weep, laugh, mourn, lose, love, hate, or be in war or peace. These are occasions in which people find themselves, and they can only respond to them. All that mortals can do in the face of these times is to be open to them."³

We are not to be born and die, plant and uproot, weep and laugh all at once, but rather in rhythm at different times. Too often we skate over times of grief and skip past times of celebration when we would do better to fully enter those times, letting other priorities fade away for a season. When a fellow leader dies, it's time to grieve. When your son trusts in Christ or your daughter gets married, it's time to celebrate. Solomon's advice is to fully engage in each time. Throw parties. Have memorial services. Emotionally experience all that is there.

Each aspect of life has its time and season; thus, we need to understand the times (see 1 Chronicles 12:32). Living well involves having the wisdom to know the times and having the faith in God to accept that our times are in his hands (see Psalm 31:15). From God's eternal view, all times are "beautiful" or "appropriate" (see Ecclesiastes 3:11).⁴ For instance, when the demographics of your community ethnically shift, your ministry needs to adapt. How can you do that well? There will be aspects of your current ministry to release and new kinds of ministry to embrace.

DEVASTATING CRITICISM: A SEASON OF REFLECTION

Recently, I suffered the most difficult criticism I've ever received because it came from an elder and his wife who had served on our staff and chose to resign over their concerns. This well-meaning, sincere couple came to believe that I was not fundamentally motivated by serving Christ, but at my core was self-interested. So they accused me of pride, lack of love, and self-promotion. That hurt. In their specific examples, situations were blown out of proportion and misinterpreted, but at my elder team's encouragement I took their concerns to God in serious self-analysis.

I did not see this season coming at all, but God used it for good. Rather than dismissing the conflict, our elders chose to work through a process that in hindsight was really wise. Although at the time it was agonizing, the Spirit of God revealed elements of truth in their

concerns. I had to face pride in my heart, a lack of sensitive love when I am driving for the goal, and ways in which I choose language to make myself look good. God has grown me by helping me see myself more clearly, even though I suspect I will be working on these issues for the rest of my life.

Two of my elders spent hours in multiple meetings with this couple, talking through Scripture, praying together, wrestling with deeper issues about personal judgment of motives, reconciliation among brothers and sisters in God's family, and God's direction for our lives. Although in the end they remained entrenched in their view and left the church, these were not wasted hours. We parted in peace, with the couple appreciating how their issues had been heard and the care that had been extended to them.

When we shared the matter with the congregation during Sunday morning services, we were able to tell the story of how a difficult matter had been handled. The body had the chance to see accountability to an elder team and how conflict can be handled wisely, even if it ends with agreeing to disagree. My sermon that morning was a personal reflection on how God worked through the intense season of wrestling. In the weeks afterward, many in the body communicated their appreciation of our openness and transparency, of conflict handled well, and of inspiration to self-reflection on their own personal motives.

This brief season of leadership conflict was better embraced than dismissed. We could have quickly accepted the couple's resignations and as quietly as possible ushered them out the door, but in doing so we would have missed what God had for us in that unique time. Truthfully, I would much rather have expended that energy on what I saw as matters more beneficial to the mission, but God had other plans. His ways of growing us and our churches are often not what we would choose. But all times from God's larger view can be beautiful.

Solomon's point is that meaning in life can be found by seeking to fear God and to enjoy life. We are to accept what God has given and rejoice in his gifts. In such an approach we can replace despair and frustration with contentment (Zuck, 1994, p. 217). If we guide our

church in sync with God's rhythms, we can discover more peace, fulfillment, joy, and hope. God guides the world in providential seasons. Although there is not a "correct" time to do everything, if we are living in rhythm with God's timing, ministry will not be meaningless. Everything will be "beautiful or appropriate" in its time, even difficult experiences (p. 222). We will be like the firmly planted tree that yields fruit in season and its leaf does not wither, but he prospers in whatever he does (Psalm 1:3).

Models in the Bible, such as the nation of Israel with her periodic feasts, Jesus with his sacrificial life, and the Apostle Paul with his zealous devotion, illustrate lives of rhythm more than balance. For a season, Jesus did carpentry and Paul made tents, but not in every season. Some nights Jesus was in prayer the entire night, but not every night. At times he sent the crowds away to be alone with his Father, but on other occasions when the disciples wanted to send them away, Jesus had the whole crowd stay for fish sandwiches. Similarly, one simple model of how to do ministry does not work. We need both to send the crowds away and to invite them for dinner—not at the same time, but in rhythm at different times.

CHRONOS CYCLES FROM THE BEGINNING

Even the description of creation in Genesis 1 uses a rhythmic, Hebrew narrative form. Each day follows a pattern, ending with the phrase "and God saw that it was good." God created seasons, days, and years. "And God said, 'Let there be lights in the expanse of the sky to separate the day from the night, and let them serve as signs to mark seasons and days and years'" (Genesis 1:14).

After the Flood, God promised that these patterns will continue. "As long as the Earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease" (Genesis 8:22). The psalmist declares, "The moon marks off the seasons, and the sun knows when to go down" (Psalm 104:19); and the prophet Jeremiah affirms, "Even the stork in the sky knows her appointed seasons, and the dove,

the swift and the thrush observe the time of their migration” (Jeremiah 8:7). We should be at least as smart as storks!

God reflects the *chronos* cycles in how he set up Israel’s rhythms of sacred and civil celebration. Every year, Israel celebrated an annual rhythm of festivals and sacrifices, including the holy Day of Atonement (see Exodus 30:10) and three annual feasts—the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Weeks, and the Feast of Tabernacles (see 2 Chronicles 8:13). As God instructed, each year Israel was to make offerings tied to the movement of the moon. “This is the monthly burnt offering to be made at each new moon during the year” (Numbers 28:14). Annual and lunar cycles were complemented by the weekly Sabbath rest, based on the pattern of God’s creation (Exodus 20:11).

In harmony with the annual, lunar, and sabbath rhythms, Israel also carried out daily offerings and times of prayer (Numbers 29:6). The Hebrews modeled a rhythmic life according to divinely inspired patterns. These spiritual rhythms corresponded to the natural rhythms formed in the created order. Only recently has science begun to discover the deep resonance of this rhythmic order.

RESEARCH INTO A NATURAL SENSE OF TIME

A casual survey of global cultures today and civilizations through history verifies that these cycles are not limited to one continent, language group, or historical time period. The rhythmic patterns revealed in God’s Word are substantiated by scientific research that finds greater implications than we had realized previously.⁵

Chronobiology is revealing a new frontier of natural rhythms. It is the study (*logos*) of life’s (*bios*) structure in time (*chronos*). Today, scientists such as Franz Halberg, the founder of modern chronobiology, are arguing that chronobiology represents a massive paradigm shift in how we approach life sciences.⁶ A relatively new advance in science, chronobiology is the study of how living things keep time. Halberg sees science moving from a homeostatic paradigm (*stasis*) to a chronobiologic paradigm (*rhythms*).

In *Rhythms of Life: The Biological Clocks That Control the Daily Lives of Every Living Thing*, Russell Foster and Leon Kreitzman bring the insights of chronobiology to the general public. The authors describe how biological clocks allow organisms to adapt and respond to the rhythms that result from the movement of the earth. “Biological clocks impose a structure that enables organisms to change their behavioral priorities in relation to the time of day, month, or year” (2005). According to Foster and Kreitzman, “Today there are probably well over a thousand scientists working on the basic science of biological time. At least ten times as many are working on applying this information in medicine, agriculture, horticulture, manned space flights, and warfare.” A new subdiscipline, chronotherapy, has discovered that a medicine’s effect on you is determined by when you take it. In the foreword to *Rhythms of Life*, Lewis Wolpert writes, “Time is embedded in our genes” (Foster and Kreitzman, 2005, p. ix). According to Susan Perry and Jim Dawson in *Secrets Our Body Clocks Reveal* (1988), five major rhythms beat in our bodies, as shown in the following table.

Your Inner Rhythms

Type	Length	Examples
Ultradian	Less than twenty-four hours	Heartbeat; ninety-minute fluctuations in energy levels and attention span; brain waves
Circadian	About a day	Temperature; blood pressure; sleep/wake cycle; cell division
Circaseptan	About a week	Rejection of organ transplants; immune response to infections; blood and urine chemicals; blood pressure; heartbeat; common cold; coping hormones
Circatrigintan	About a month	Menstrual cycle
Circannual	About a year	Seasonal depression; sexual drive; susceptibility to some diseases

Although the circadian rhythm (from the Latin for “around a day”) is the most well known, our rhythms vary slightly from individual to individual (23.6 hours, 24.3 hours, 25.4 hours, and so on). At times our internal clocks can get slightly out of sync with the environmental rhythm of a 24-hour day. But if all our individual cycles vary from a precise 24-hour day, wouldn’t we in time get terribly out of sync? “Fortunately,” write Perry and Dawson, “our bodies are able to reset themselves each day to the 24-hour rhythm, thanks to many powerful time cues. Chronobiologists call these cues *zeitgebers*, German for ‘time givers’” (pp. 11–13). Scientists at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem have discovered a tiny molecule that may keep our rhythms in sync with the earth’s rotation. These physical temporal markers create a bodily flow in harmony with the chronos cycles of nature.⁷ “All of us in the developed world now live in a ‘24/7’ society,” write Foster and Kreitzman.

This imposed structure is in conflict with our basic biology. The impact can be seen in our struggle to balance our daily lives with the stresses this places on our physical health and mental well-being. We are now aware of this fundamental tension between the way we want to live and the way we are built to live. It is hoped that our developing understanding of the basic biology will provide us with a means to resolve this fundamental dilemma of modern living. [p. 5]

Correlate Foster and Kreitzman’s analysis with local church ministry. When we impose ministry patterns on our churches, we can be in conflict with our basic biology and with the temporal structure of our environment. When we ignore the deep structure of chronos cycles in our churches, we generate “noise” that puts people in tension with their created rhythms. An attempt to override basic life cycles leads to disaster. No wonder we feel so much stress in our churches. In a senseless syndrome, church people feel guilty because we cannot overcome natural cycles by sleeping less or by maintaining a constant pattern of

ministry. But natural rhythms were never meant to be overcome; instead, we are meant to harmonize our church with them.

A rhythm approach is not a new artificial life management system to impose order on our churches. Instead, it recognizes the order built into our temporal environment. This is the way life works whether we want to fight it, ignore it, or embrace it. As scientists are discovering, living rhythmically leads to a healthier life. If everything around us functions according to natural rhythms, why don't we in our churches?

FOCUSED AND ENJOYABLE MINISTRY

Thinking rhythmically makes practical sense in church work as it does in all of life. Some of our insane “busyness” comes from trying to cultivate, plant, fertilize, weed, harvest, and repair the fences in every season. We are not meant to minister that way. Rhythm frees us to focus on one season at a time. Rhythm honors excellence and the sacrifice required for achievements while also providing times for renewal. A rhythm approach is more practical because it explicitly takes into account seasons and stages.

For example, at the start of a new church, you may build a large team to set up and take down chairs, sound gear, and children's equipment every week in an elementary school. Once you have a permanent space that team is no longer needed—or at least not such a big team. If you are between pastors, then it is time for a pastoral search, but once you have a pastor in place, there is no ongoing need for a search committee. Such overly obvious examples help us see that it makes sense to acknowledge that different stages and seasons of church life should lead us to focus on different issues.

For instance, is this the time in your church to reorganize your leadership structure? If you have just grown dramatically, then perhaps yes. But would you reorganize just because you attended a great seminar on a cool way to organize your leadership team? Or, in another example, is this the time for a citywide evangelism push? In one sense, it is always time for evangelism, but at this time in your church do you

need to focus more on internal health or external growth? While you are giving energy to rebuilding your small groups should you also engage in a citywide major evangelism effort? Thinking rhythmically helps us ask these kinds of timing questions: Is this the right time to focus on this ministry, or do we need to concentrate on something else?

We are unnecessarily burning out our people and our pastors in the damaging pursuit of totally balanced churches. Members in a congregation get weary when they hear too many fervent messages urging that they come, serve, give, study, and attend one event, program, and meeting after another. Are they all equally important right now?

Our constant and excessive expectations reduce our missional effectiveness, rob our people of joy, and rob us of joy as leaders. Unnecessary guilt is created by attempting the impossible ideal of providing proportionate effort to every dimension at all times. The same notion applies to major ministries, such as children, students, small groups, global missions, and worship. All should be strong and appropriately balanced, but to grow toward that ideal in the rhythms of a church's life, we must give extra focus at times to a certain ministry and not give that energy to others. Of course we already do this, but we beat ourselves up for it. A rhythmic model gives permission for "unbalanced" focus in seasons, and in fact advocates it.

If you free yourself from the false expectations inherent in trying to achieve the perfectly balanced church—and all the unnecessary burdens it places on you—that step alone will decrease your stress and relieve some of your frustration. At the very least, it will reduce your false guilt and increase your peace. Then you'll be ready to adopt rhythm as a better alternative.

WHAT TIME IS IT?

We have lots of activity and wonder why we have so little productivity for Christ. Being busy is obviously not the same as being fruitful. When

you are trying to decide where to put your energy, you appropriately consider:

Your mission: Why are you doing what you are doing?

Your culture: How do things work in your region?

Your community: How are you making a difference for Christ?

Your uniqueness: What uniquely makes sense for your church?

Your organization: How could you simplify for effectiveness?

Your theology: Are you biblical?

Your communication: Are you being clear and consistent?

Your Church in Rhythm calls you to consider another dimension: What time is it in your church? In what stage are you in your life cycle as an organization? In what ministry seasons do you find yourself? How can you flow ministry better in the natural cycles of life? The two following tables summarize contrasts between the picture of a balanced healthy church and the better paradigm of rhythmic health portrayed in this book.

Balanced Health Versus Rhythmic Health

Balanced Health	Rhythmic Health
a pose	a dance
static	dynamic
rigid	flexible
you can have it all now	you can have much over time
control	embrace
setting goals	seizing opportunities
line	wave
all at once	over a lifetime
artificial/man-made	natural/organic/God-created
photograph	video

Advantages of Rhythm Versus Balance

Burdens of Balanced Health	Benefits of Rhythmic Health
Guilt over not giving adequate attention to every priority at every time	Peace in releasing expectations that do not fit this time and in setting a healthy pace for activities
Busyness in trying to push every purpose and ministry in every season and stage	Fulfillment in seizing the unique opportunities offered by each season and in building life-enhancing rituals
Stress in the attempt to keep everything proportionate at all times	Joy in embracing the blessings of each time and in the oscillation of work and rest
Despair of being stuck in the impossible pursuit of keeping everything in balance	Hope in anticipating a new season ahead and the ultimate rhythm sure to come

Rhythm enables us to build better churches by the power of God because we dance church in harmony with the cycles and seasons that come from God's hands. We can minister with less guilt and stress and be more effective. Rhythm offers a better way to do church.

EXERCISE

What aspects of rhythm appeal to you? What benefits do you see inherent in the metaconcept of rhythm?

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