

Stewarding the Sabbath

**PRIORITIZING PACE
FOR CHRISTIAN LEADERS**

By William Vanderbloemen



Priorities and the Sabbath

“But if He says that first He made the formless creation, and then that with form, His position is not absurd—not at least if He is capable of distinguishing priority in eternity, priority in time, priority in preference, priority in origin.”¹ - St. Augustine

From the beginning in Genesis, to Jesus’ life and teachings, to John’s witness of the Revelation, Scriptures depict an aspect of God’s orderliness in His priority and pace. In Ecclesiastes 3:11 (NASB), we are reminded that “(God) has made everything appropriate in its time. He has also set eternity in their heart, yet so that man will not find out the work which God has done from the beginning even to the end.” Different seasons, we are told, are appropriate for each created thing and living being. This faculty of created order is not lost in God’s created image of man.

Billy Graham’s consistency in ministry throughout the years can be attributed to the recognition of this necessity - for he would have known what pace was appropriate for him. The lessons one may draw from how Graham stewarded his ministry over a long period of time extend far beyond the ministry itself. The Western Christian is familiar with the apostle Paul’s rhetoric, to “run in such a way that you may win” (1 Corinthians 9:24). Many turn to it when they need to ‘sprint out of the gates’, and reference it when they talk about finishing strong. Regrettably, one sees few who run the entire race well.

The author’s professional practice involves helping faith-based organizations staff with the right talents. It has consulted with many organizations that are in the wake of a sudden departure of a leader who failed to adequately set the pace. In nearly every such situation the person involved exudes a feeling of exhaustion, and in many involving moral deficiency, they demonstrate a deteriorating spirit, focus, and energy towards their own leadership positions. These case studies lead us to conclude that weary leaders are prone to making poor decisions.

The experience of fatigue in ministry known as “burn-out” often facilitates an atmosphere for temptations. Lance Witt writes in his book *Replenish* that fatigue creates a sense of disillusionment and depression, depriving one of motivations to fulfill the purpose of that role.²

Once a failure has occurred, the natural response is to attempt a contrived resolution, often due to pride on the part of the leader. The healthiest response, however, is often to relinquish one’s duties, if only temporarily, for the purpose of replenishing the lost energy or focus; and for those who failed moral challenges, a time of spiritual rehab (*see Spiritual Rehab box*). That may require taking responsibilities in a different arena or with a pay reduction. The wise and humble will take the necessary steps to achieve a long-term win. As often is the case, a leader has the greatest potential for success when he or she is healthy—spiritually, emotionally, and physically.

The author’s professional experience also witnesses that the healthiest rest periods are often supervised ones such as sabbaticals, that are held accountable by others in leadership. Since people heal at different rates, there is no golden rule

for how long a person must “sit out” in the wake of a failure. Rather, those who return healthy tend to look to others to help them know if, and when, to re-enter a leadership position.

Ensuring a clear plan is in place for a supervisory counselor, board, or family member to help the Christian leader know when proper healing has occurred is mandatory. What sets Christian leaders apart in this area is maintaining a steady, manageable pace appropriate to that person. The Fourth Commandment provides the ultimate foundation to a healthy pace for sustainable leadership — keeping the Sabbath.

Although emphasized throughout Scripture, Christian

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leaders often disregard the Sabbath principle, working many stress-filled hours, neglecting their own physical health and well-being of their family. Without a healthy pace or rhythm life can seem disorderly and debilitated.

The Genesis account of God’s creation, above all else, depicts an image of God as Creator and God as Designer—organizing a world to facilitate order for a being created in His image. Part of that order is to be intentional about resting from work, reflecting on accomplishments and connecting with people. To be in His presence means to live within order, as lacking a healthy pace is to be “formless”, just like the earth before the Spirit hovered over it. As Lynne M. Baab states, “A rhythm allowing time for rest is essential to perceiving the forward movement of time toward God’s fulfillment of all things.”³

Principles for Stewarding a Healthy Pace

Plan Daily

Facilitating a healthy pace for life would start by pacing each day, where a good beginning sets the stage. Every effective Christian leader has a disciplined morning routine. Best selling author Brennan Manning is credited with saying, “Quiet time with God is like manna from heaven. It comes daily, and it disappears with the dawn.”⁴

A healthy pace for each day originates with a healthy beginning of the day. Martin Luther said if he had a regular day, he would pray for an hour before going to work; if it would be really busy, he would pray for two. The older and, unfortunately, busier people get, the more they realize that devotional time must be the first thing done in the morning. While no one can

A Season for Spiritual Rehab

"I made a lot of mistakes...and one of them was going too fast...My character was not caught up with my gifting," said Mark Driscoll in the interview with Brian Houston on the unraveled Mars Hill tragedy.⁵ What could have prevented this situation, as he explains, was intentionally developing himself "under Godly, spiritual authority" prior to taking the role of pastor.

For Christian leaders, the key component to recalibrating one's pace is repentance followed by spiritual rehabilitation. While they must seek prudent programming on their schedules, willful surrender to God's sovereignty must precede man's wisdom and rationale. As one seeks God's authority in setting the pace, guidance can be stewarded by a thought and experienced leader who has earned the credibility to speak unto circumstances warranting spiritual rehabilitation. Inevitably, the fallen leader needs to have a trusting, mentor-mentee relationship with the individual facilitating the spiritual healing process.

Pastor Dino Rizzo of the ARC (Association of Related Churches) network exemplifies the necessity of mentorship. Upon his resignation as Senior Pastor due to spiritual depletion, which resulted in an extramarital affair, Rizzo took a sabbatical for healing and restoration. An eleven-year friendship with ARC founder Billy Hornsby led to a mentoring relationship with Hornsby, which proved to be critical to Rizzo's spiritual rehabilitation. Reflecting upon Hornsby's role in his life, Rizzo wrote: "He [Billy Hornsby] is for me a big brother who... has a deep well of wisdom when it comes to being a peacemaker—navigating and diffusing relationship challenges."⁶ In navigating through the journey of repentance and restoration, leaders must seek a capacity for healing that can only come from God's forgiveness often manifested by the guidance of Godly mentors.

claim perfection, each person has the capacity to establish those daily habits, that the first words uttered each morning would be prayers to the Savior, and that the first words they read each morning would be from the Word of God to focus their priorities on resting in Him.

Plan Weekly

Beyond setting goals for each day, healthy Christian leaders take time to evaluate each week. Whether that is a date night with the spouse, time away, or exercise goals, each person must schedule out each week. Leaders must prioritize both work-related and personal events in a weekly calendar, setting a pace and a punch list for each week to assess themselves regularly. Balancing work life and personal life will require the proper scheduling of events, each of which can easily be dismissed without the discipline of a weekly plan. Perhaps a simple look at the week each Sunday night helps to set the plan accordingly. Christian leaders are wise to have a set time to go over the weekly calendar with the spouse and family.

Plan Seasonally

There are different times in life that are just going to be busier than others, but effective Christian leaders will try to block out seasons – building around periods of time when they know things are not going to be as busy. For example, since the enactment of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act in 2014, otherwise known as Health Care Reform or Obamacare, health insurance on the individual market can only be applied for during certain seasons of the year. Health insurance consultants realize those are the busiest times to work, as it becomes

the high volume season of the year. Even a pool builder will plan ahead for the hot months, so he has all the supplies and orders prepared for the time of year when he needs to work most.

Plan Annually

All business and ministry leaders develop annual plans. Keeping pace means making annual goals and keeping records of them. A Gallup Poll in 2013 indicated that 68% of Americans do not prepare a detailed household budget.⁷ How can one expect to achieve long-term financial goals without a plan in place?

The same goes for achieving long-term emotional and spiritual health goals as a Christian leader. One must reflect upon what his or her specific areas of improvement need to be in setting a healthy pace, thus creating achievable goals in order to make sustainable progress toward them. Take the example of fitness goals in a new year. Instead of making a resolution to lose 10-15 pounds, a more effective approach may be to set manageable goals, such as losing 13 pounds over a 26-week period.

Pace to Lead

As Christian leaders acquire a good sense of their own pace, they must extend that quality to their leadership in organizations. Many Christian leaders do a poor job leading by example in setting a healthy pace. They send out emails at four in the morning and staying up way too late working.

One way to lead by example and communicate the importance of pace to a team is to set communication expectations.

For example, an email might mean, “I would like to hear back in 24 hours or less;” a text might mean, “I really need to hear back soon;” and a phone call might mean, “Pick it up if you possibly can.”

A system like this, properly implemented, is rarely abused. People will not call unless they need to, and they text when they need more urgent attention than an email may call for. Establishing simple communication protocols helps create a foundation for setting the pace for the team. The Lord Himself

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took a day off to keep pace. He expects the same from Christian leaders.

According to an old story, a man told his friend, “God said he wanted a Sabbath, and He’s going to get His Sabbath. It’s just a question of whether He gets it from you every week, or in one final payment with an early ending.” A common perception of a ‘hard worker’ is one who is known to start work early and end it late. Some of the most prominent CEOs and leaders in the business world proudly list their days—beginning early in the morning, exercising and checking email, and ending insanely late. Their own daily rituals depict a high capacity for personal accomplishment.

However, the Christian leader is called to be different, set apart from the world’s philosophy of balancing life. The Christian’s leadership has a different purpose, one that is God given, to produce an orderliness and balance which can be fulfilled only when he or she lives according to the pace God has ordained.

When God’s Grace Changes Pace

One of the biggest mistakes accomplished people often make is staying in their game or place of leadership too long. A familiar example is Brett Favre’s retirement from the Green Bay Packers. He is considered to be one of the greatest quarterbacks in NFL history, though he will be remembered for the way he repeatedly retired and returned to play, leaving poorly. Now, Favre is jeered in Green Bay when he visits, as he failed to depart when his career was finished. Of course, that was not the legacy he wanted to leave. A quarterback in the NFL is most successful when he can stand in the “pocket” and continue to deliver on a yard-yielding pass, when everybody else would forfeit and quit.

The same is true for many who are in position of leadership. Pastors, entrepreneurs, and other Christian leaders are gifted with God-given talents in their own “game.” However, the pride

of a person often leads them to stay beyond the proper finish of that season of life.

Every Christian leader is led by God to fulfill the role called and empowered by the Spirit to fulfill the purpose for a particular season of his or her life. When God moves His grace to a new season, that leader is then called to move on with it. Stubbornly staying on when God has lifted His grace from a certain season of life, as it did with Brett Favre, only results in disorderly pace. This is just not good stewardship of God’s gifts.

Commenting on this frailty, Scott Roding writes, “The only proper response is a humble admission of our need to set aside our penchant for ownership and come under the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the transformation of our hearts.”⁸ Leaders who commit to prioritizing a healthy pace for themselves, their family, their team, and their organization will find themselves in the company of the rare few who start well, finish well, and run the entire race in victory.

Notes

¹ St. Augustine, *Confessions*, Book XII, xxix, in Loeb, J. *Augustine confessions: Books IX-XIII*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

² L. Witt, *Replenish: Leading from a Healthy Soul*. (Ada, MI: Baker Books, 2011).

³ L. M. Baab, *Sabbath Keeping: Finding Freedom in the Rhythms of Rest* (Westmont, IL: IVP, 2005), p. 94.

⁴ B. Manning, *The Ragamuffin Gospel: Good News for the Bedraggled, Beat-up, and Burnt Out* (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah Books, 2005).

⁵ See M. Lee and S. E. Zylstra. “What Mark Driscoll told Brian Houston at Hillsong Conference,” (June 30, 2015). Accessed <http://www.christianitytoday.com/gleanings/2015/june/distraction-down-under-hillsong-mark-driscoll-conference.html>.

⁶ See “A tribute to Billy Hornsby,” (March 24, 2011). Retrieved from <http://www.charismamag.com/site-archives/24-uncategorised/13105-a-tribute-to-billy-hornsby>.

⁷ D. Jacobe, “One in three Americans prepare a detailed household budget,” Gallup Poll (June 3, 2013). Retrieved from <http://www.gallup.com/poll/162872/one-three-americans-prepare-detailed-household-budget.aspx>.

⁸ Scott Roding, *The Steward Leader: Transforming People, Organizations, and Communities* (Westmont, IL: IVP, 2010), p. 85.

About the Author



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