

Reframing Retirement

By David Burke

Sidney worked hard all his life. He was well-regarded by his employers, cared well for his family and was active in his church. The day Sidney qualified for the aged pension was retirement day. He quit his job, left his church roles, said goodbye to his wider family and was last seen hitting the highway for a twelve-month 4WD trip with his wife.

Sidney's retirement fits a common pattern in the western world. The years after employment are seen as a time for self-indulgence in the dreams of a lifetime and for spending freely on one's heart's desire.

Such a view of retirement is uncommon globally and historically. Most people in most places at most times continue in some form of work until they are incapable or until they die.

What is a Christian frame on retirement?

First, some foundations:

1. *We are made for work.* Work was part of human identity before sin disrupted God's creational design (Gen 2:15). After the fall, work continues, but is now part of the fallen human condition (Gen 3:17-19). We can expect to work again, with pleasure, in the new creation (someone needs to pick the delicious fruits and harvest the healing herbs – Rev 22:2).
2. *Work is more than paid employment.* The world of employment contracts, wages and salaries is a comparatively recent one and is unknown in the majority of the world. Even in the west, the unpaid activities of childminding, care of the aged or disabled, community service, church volunteering and such like deserve to be included under

the heading 'work'.

3. *The Bible speaks against idleness.* Various texts teach those who could work, but choose not to, will suffer for it and do not deserve sympathy or help from God's people (eg. Prov. 19:15; 31:27; 2 Thess 3:6-12). All who can work, should do something that they can call 'work'.
4. *We are also made for rest.* God provided for a weekly rest day which is a recognition of our creaturely limitations and a reminder to trust his provision for us (Ex 16:1-5; 20:8). Yet awaiting is his eternal rest (Heb 4:9-10).
5. *We are mortal.* This life ends in death, unless the Lord returns first, or we are taken up like Elijah (2 Kings 2:1-12). Whether our years are few or 70, 80 or more we are frail creatures who will return to the dust from which we were made (Gen 2:7; Ps 90:9-10, 103:14-15). We are to be wise about our mortality (Ps 90:12) and especially to remember our creator before it is too late (Eccles 12:1,6-7).
6. *We decline with age.* Most of us will have declining capacity and strength as our years pass and death's shadow looms (Eccles 12:2-5).

What does all this imply?

There is a time to leave paid employment or at least step back. This creates employment opportunities for younger workers and helps refresh workplaces, including in ministry employment. It also avoids the sad picture of the workers who just will not let go. However, retirement from employment is not the same as retirement from work.

Consider these samples of people who retired from employment

but kept working:

A widowed librarian left employment in her early 60s and served as a volunteer to establish libraries and train local librarians in an overseas theological college and then two small Australian colleges;

A couple sold their computer business, down-sized their home, upskilled as ESL teachers and gave themselves to serve through language teaching outreach to refugees through their local church and on the mission field;

An accountant left paid employment aged 57 and, with his wife, became a self-funded missionary using his professional skills in a difficult location and is still serving in his 70s.

A finance industry worker left employment in her early 50s for an intentional 'next chapter' of serving family, church ministry, some part-time lower level employment, along with hobbies and travel.

Two women retired from mental health employment and developed resources in a Christian approach to church-based first aid in mental health.

These people retired from employment but did not retire from work. They are like Moses who served until his death at 120 (Ex 34:7) or Paul who spoke of pressing forward rather than resting on his past (Phil 3:7-14). This is retirement reframed as an opportunity to continue serving.

To balance that it needs to be said that there may be seasons of life when withdrawal from activity for a period of contemplation,

refreshment and renewal is apt. Early church figures like Augustine and Chrysostom withdrew for contemplation after their conversions. People may use long service leave, or the space between employment, or after their last employment to give themselves to rest and to personal improvement of some kind. But the time will come again to fulfil the creational mandate and work while there are hours in our days (Jn 9:4; 11:9). And so, Chrysostom and Augustine each soon left their temporary retreats to give unwearied work in the Lord's service as great church preachers.

By all means let's retire from employment, slow down, and take time to enjoy the life that God gives. But let's keep fulfilling our garden identity by working in God's world and serving according to our capacity and circumstances. That enduring work of ours is a thank offering for Christ's work for us and in expectation of the eternal rest to come when he returns.

There is a time to recognise that we will lay down our labours and surrender to rest (2 Tim 4:6-8). However, many in the western world seem to confuse retirement from employment with retirement from work and seek to enter that rest too early.

The last word is John Piper's. At the end of a book on retirement he says: *Here is my prayer for retirement – Lord, spare me this curse!*

David Burke whose non-retirement dinner as a lecturer at Christ College was held on 1 November 2019