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For the Sake of the Kingdom: Redefining Retirement

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The concept of retirement is rather recent in origins. Most historians trace the concept back to Germany's "Iron Chancellor," Otto von Bismarck, who pushed through a series of social changes in the late 19th century. Among those changes was a system something like Social Security, intended as a guaranteed pension for the elderly.

Bismarck's idea was that workers in Germany would need to give way so that younger men would be able to enter the workforce and support their families. The concept of retirement from the workforce took root, and by the mid-point of the 20th century, most American workers expected to retire at something close to age 65.



The contemporary ideal of retirement was a life of travel, leisure, golf, and time with grandchildren. In states like Florida, California, and Arizona, entire communities of retirees emerged. "Leisurevilles" advertised a concept of the good life that was free from employment and largely, if not exclusively, devoted to withdrawal from the world of all work.

These communities are now in trouble. The concept of retirement is now changing, brought about by the economic recession that has propelled many older Americans back into the workforce. As Laura Vanderkam reports in *USA Today*:

After decades of decline, the labor force participation rate among people older than 65 rose from a low of 10.7% in 1987 to more than 17% now. Nearly a third of those ages 65-69 are working or looking for work, up from less than 20% in the 1980s, and surveys of Baby Boomers find that many don't intend to retire immediately either.

We will likely look back on the period between 1950 and 2000 as the Era of Retirement. When President Franklin Roosevelt signed Social Security into law, the expectation was that workers would probably live an average of 5-8 years after retirement. But the extension of the human lifespan during the last half of the 20th century meant that retirement could easily last for twenty years, and often even longer. Now, those who live to age 65, Vanderkam reports, "can quite reasonably expect to live to age 85 or more."

Here is the key sentence in Vanderkam's essay: "The notion that work is something you want to stop doing is getting a makeover as well." It's about time.

The Bible dignifies both labor and age, but the modern American ideal of retirement is nowhere to be found in the Scriptures. Instead, lives of useful service to the Kingdom of Christ are the expectation, all the way to the grave.

The economic crisis of recent years has forced many Americans to rethink and redefine retirement as a matter of necessity. For Christians, this represents an important opportunity. The ideal for Christians should be redeployment, even after employment. There is so much Kingdom work to be done, and older believers are desperately needed in this great task. There are missionaries to be assisted, ministries to be energized, young couples to be counseled, boys without fathers to be mentored, and wisdom and experience to be shared. The possibilities for Christian redeployment are endless.

There is room in the Christian life for leisure, but not for a life devoted to leisure. As long as we have the strength and

ability to serve, we are workers needed in Christ's Kingdom. Given the needs and priorities all around us, who would settle for life in Leisureville?

Laura Vanderkam, "[This Isn't Grandpa's Retirement](#)," *USA Today*, Wednesday, January 5, 2011.

"[Rethinking Retirement](#)," *The Albert Mohler Program*, Friday, March 27, 2009. [Listen here](#):
<http://www.albertmohler.com/2009/03/27/rethinking-retirement-2/>

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