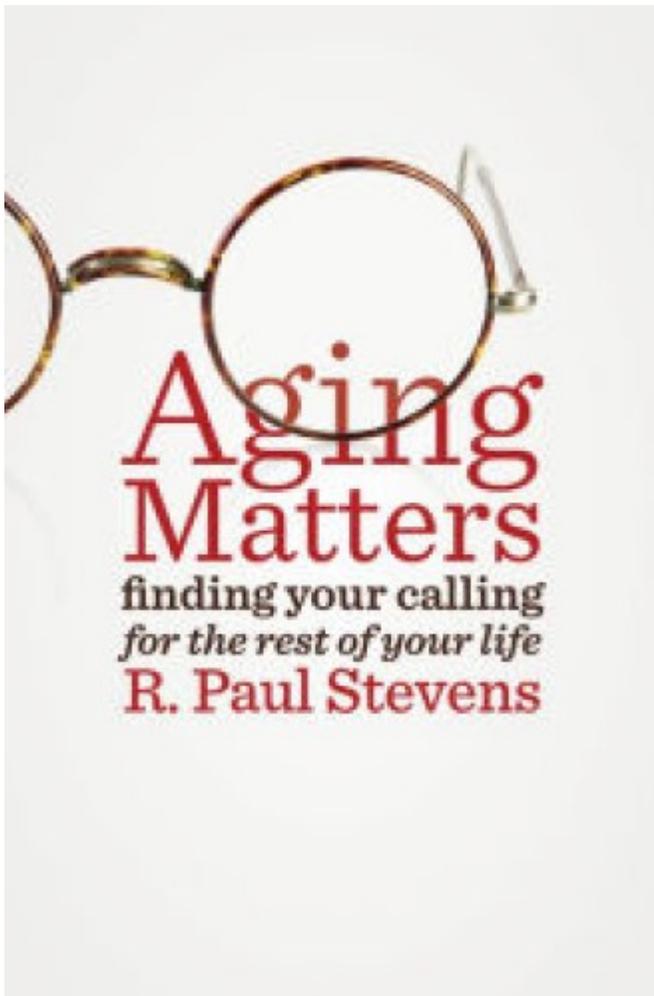


The work that begins at retirement

Life's later decades present distinctive virtues—and vices.

by [Bob Mink](#) in the [November 8, 2016](#) issue

In Review



Aging Matters

By R. Paul Stevens
Eerdmans

Many readers who are past middle age will disagree with R. Paul Stevens's opening assertion that "we should work until we die." That is, until they read on. Stevens's foundational premise is that God calls us into meaningful work at every stage of our life. "We do not retire from our calling even if we have retired from a career" because "while one chooses a career, one is chosen for a calling." In this way, Stevens reframes the concept of retirement from a Christian perspective.

The work that Stevens thinks we should continue until we die is not the same work we did prior to retirement. Surprisingly, it has the potential to be even better. "Retirement can open up possibilities of work, voluntary or remunerated, that better fits one's gifts, talents, personality, and life experience." Defining work broadly as "energy expended purposively," he draws a picture of retirement that includes purposefully and meaningfully contributing to the lives of others. As we age, we are called to live more than a life of rest and leisure.

At the age of 78, and eight years retired as a professor from Regent College, Stevens acknowledges he is writing in part for himself. He includes a variety of personal examples and regularly cites scripture as a way of integrating his faith with his search for the meaning of work after retirement. But he also writes for the large population of aging Christians who fill pews and pulpits—including those who, like me, are semiretired and zeroing in on their calling for the remainder of life.

I was both challenged and encouraged by Stevens's assertion that "aging as a human experience should be an arena in which we become deeper spiritually." Such spiritual work helps us to know God better, "to go deeper with God, ourselves, and others" and to revel in the joy and delight of being God's child. Contrary to the idea that ending one's work career accompanies a leveling off of spiritual growth, Stevens envisions retirement as a time that is ripe for growth in the life of faith. He offers concrete suggestions to this end, adapting the concepts of vice and virtue to the particularities of aging.

In a chapter titled "The Vices of Aging" Stevens elaborates how the seven deadly sins might uniquely test those who are growing older. An older person experiencing *pride* might refuse to listen to or learn from those who are younger. An aging person might be *envious* of those who have better health, families, and financial resources. Life's experiences might result in an older person having an *angry* heart that leads to frequent verbal attacks on others. For some people the attainment of retirement

gives way to *sloth* and boredom. The uncertainty and fear of old age might lead to *greed*. *Gluttony* can become an issue for the elderly when most of social life revolves around eating. And contrary to what some younger readers may think, the desire for intimacy and affection can turn into *lust* even for the elderly.

Each vice presents a test, but also an invitation and opportunity to grow. Stevens counters the vices of aging by commending the embodiment of the theological “virtues of late life”: faith, hope, and love. He defines faith as “abandoning oneself to the support, succor, and beauty of God,” noting that “at an age when we are no longer striving to succeed in a career, or when drivenness is reduced, we may deepen our resting in God as our portion, our bounty, and our delight.” Hope is particularly necessary for those who are experiencing physical decline and the loss of institutions they once held dear. And as the apostle Paul declares, the greatest of these is love. The challenge and call to love God completely and our neighbor as our self does not cease with aging.

Authors who write about a subgroup of the population face two dangers: relying on inaccurate stereotypes and restricting their readership to a small slice of the population. Stevens’s depictions of elderly people and the aging process mostly seem fair and true. What is missing, however, is an acknowledgment that not all aging people are educated believers with sufficient funds for their later years. In his discussion of legacy Stevens provides a solid biblical application for the stewardship of one’s estate. But he fails to mention that for many elderly people there is no estate.

Yet the chapter on legacy may be where this book has its broadest appeal. Stevens’s discussion of money, stewardship, and God’s kingdom is challenging and helpful for Christians of any age. The value of the rest of the book for younger readers may be minimal beyond helping them understand neighbors who belong to older generations. But such understanding is a gift too.