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Knowing What is Right and Doing It (Wheaton, IL)

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**Wheaton College Chapel
Wheaton IL
March 17, 2004**

C. William Pollard

“Knowing What is Right and Doing It”

Faith, Profit and Decision-Making – Christians in the Corporation. This is the subject of the upcoming conference sponsored by the Center for Applied Christian Ethics. I hope each of you will have the opportunity to attend one or more of the sessions of this important conference.

As I say that, I realize that corporate America today is not a shining example of ethical or moral behavior. Corruption, greed, arrogance, deceit, misuse of power, and self-interest have been part of a pattern or practice of far too many corporate leaders, and Christians are not exempt. Some of those who already have been indicted or are currently under investigation also were leaders in their local church.

How do we explain such a result? Is it just inherent in the process of achieving the corporate purpose of making money and creating wealth? Can we solve the problem with more government control or supervision or with added governance responsibilities for the board of directors or more stringent standards for outside auditors? Or, is there something more at work that is fundamental to

the understanding of human behavior and the development of moral and ethical leadership?

I suggest that we need nothing less than a radical reformation of our thought and action that would include a renewed focus on the development and shaping of conscience and character. This subject should become an integral part of the curriculum of our institutions of higher learning, especially those that seek to be Christ centered. Over 100 years ago, a course in moral philosophy was a standard curriculum offering in American colleges. At Wheaton, it was taught by the President. This subject has meaning in its application and also should be part of the continuing learning process of leadership development within the corporation itself.

For those of us who are Christians, this also would include a better understanding of how we can integrate the claims of our faith with the demands of our work -- to know what is right and not only practice it with our brothers and sisters in Christ on Sunday but also to have the courage and conviction to have it tested under fire Monday through Friday as we make money, serve customers, and rub shoulders with our colleagues and competitors.

Can the business corporation be a moral community for the development of human character? Can it be a place where you can consider the question of God

and His creative and redemptive work? Where the example of Jesus and His life of serving others becomes a standard for all business leaders to follow? A place where people are encouraged not only to do things right but also to do the right thing?

By the way, how do you know or how are you learning to determine what is right and what is wrong? If we were sitting down and having lunch together, or if you were interviewing for a position with my firm and I asked you this simple question: How do you determine whether something is right or wrong? – what would be your answer?

Several years ago, I had the responsibility of serving on the selection committee for a new President and Chief Executive Office of a large public company where I also served on the Board of Directors. We interviewed some of the top leaders in the industry for this position. I asked each candidate one very simple question: How do you determine whether something is right or wrong? The initial response from many was limited to how he determined whether the business was in trouble or not. After I explained that the question went beyond business issues and involved the question of whether an action was morally right or wrong, the answers that came back were often very confusing.

Some concluded that you determined right and wrong by the way you were raised or by the views of your parents. Others thought that the reference point was the law. Only a few were ready to identify that their ultimate reference point began with the belief in God or an authority beyond themselves.

Unfortunately, this experience reflects where many business leaders are today. They have not thought much about who they really are or what is their purpose in life or where they are ultimately going or leading others. The answer to this question for me starts with God and the truth found in His word.

Our Scripture reading this morning comes from the first chapter of James starting with verse 2. I am reading from the Message, a version which is intended to communicate through the informal idiom of everyday street language or the language of the marketplace.

Read from James I

After providing this introduction to his letter, James proceeds to remind us:

1. To act upon what we hear and know;
2. To avoid favoring those who have more influence and power and discriminating against those who do not;

3. To **do** what we say and believe. Faith without works is dead. There is no room for two-faced hypocrites.
4. To hold our tongue, live wisely and humbly, not twisting the truth or promoting our own interests at the expense of others.
5. To test the reality of our faith by how we reach out to those in need and avoid the corruption of this world.
6. To be about the hard work of getting along with others and treating people with dignity, worth, and honor.
7. To know what is right and do it.
8. To avoid the arrogance of success and richness and to invest what we have or achieved for God's purposes.
9. To be simple and direct in our communications and say what is true.
10. To seek God's righteousness, pray for His will and expect answers. God does not play hide and seek with our requests of Him.

Wonderful truths –principles and guidelines for a way of life. But how do we take these guidelines off a page in the Bible and make them a reality in the way we live?

Let me share with you some of my experiences, imperfect as they are, of learning, living, making mistakes, and leading in a corporate environment of making money and serving customers.

I joined the corporate world over 27 years ago after practicing law for 10 years and then serving for 5 years here at Wheaton in the administration as well as doing some teaching.

As I concluded my time at Wheaton and was preparing to go back to the practice of law, I was recruited to consider joining a relatively small, at that time, public company called ServiceMaster. The Company was located in Downers Grove and was led by two Wheaton grads, Ken Hansen and Ken Wessner.

It seemed like a great opportunity. The two Kens had set a fast pace for growth with a plan of doubling in size every 3 to 4 years. They also had developed an environment and culture consistent with my faith beliefs. The Company's objectives were: To honor God in all we do; To help people develop;

To pursue excellence; To grow profitably. Those first two objectives were set out as end goals, the second two as means goals. It was not an exclusive environment only for Christians. In fact, many of the people and leaders of the Company did not profess to be Christians. But it was an open environment where the question of God and His place in the work environment could be considered and where people of faith were encouraged to share and live their faith and were often reminded that “If you don’t live it, you don’t believe it.”

During the recruiting process, the two Kens shared their vision for the future and inferred that someday I might have an opportunity to lead the Company. And so, as I came to that final day of decision about whether I would join the ServiceMaster team and as I sat in Ken Hansen’s office waiting to sign the final documents of employment, I decided to press the two Kens about exactly what I would have to do to be CEO of this Company.

After all, I was 38 years old and time was running out. I also was looking at an opportunity to join a large law firm in the city. I felt I needed to know what was necessary for me to secure the top spot in the Company. So I started pressing Ken Hansen on what needed to be done and how long it would take for me to be President and CEO of this Company. After about five minutes of listening to me, Ken Hansen stood up, looked me in the eye, and said: “Bill, the interview is over.”

As I was ushered to the front door and left ServiceMaster that morning, I concluded that I'd blown my opportunity and this was God's way of directing me back to the practice of law. Two days later, Ken Hansen called me on the phone and asked me if I wanted to know what happened in his office that day. I said sure and we met for breakfast the next morning. Ken's words to me that morning were simply put this way: Bill, if you want to come to ServiceMaster and contribute, you will have a great career. But if you are coming to the Company for a title or position or to promote yourself, you'd better forget it. Ken then proceeded to share with me the meaning and role of being a servant leader in a public company. There were lessons for me to learn, the first of which was never give a title or position to somebody who can't live without it.

And as I made the decision that day to join the ServiceMaster team, Ken would test my commitment and also take time to teach me what it was like to walk in the shoes of the people I would lead. During the first eight weeks of my assignment as a corporate vice president, I spent my days out working with our service workers doing the service tasks we perform for our customers. In so doing, I learned the reality of my dependence upon and responsibility to the people I would lead. Little did I realize then that this would ultimately involve over 250,000 people as we grew to serve over 12 million customers. This experience

often reminded me of my own imperfections and the need to admit my mistakes and ask for forgiveness and seek guidance from above.

Later on in my career, the faces of our service workers would flash across my mind as I was faced with those inevitable judgment calls between the rights and wrongs of running a business. The integrity of my actions had to pass their scrutiny. Otherwise, I was deceiving myself and those whom I was committed to serve. Peter Drucker has referred to this type of leadership as reflecting the ethic of prudence. A prudence that demands of a leader to be transparent and an example by what he or she says and does. It is the example that Jesus taught us as He took a towel and a basin of water and washed His disciples' feet, showing them and us that no leader is greater than those that he or she is leading.

Another lesson I was soon to learn was to accept people for their differences and to be ready to be surprised by their potential. A colleague of mine tells of an experience of his that has been a great reminder of this point. It is often the custom of firms to hand out service pins in recognition of years of service. My friend was involved in such an event. He was surprised by the response of one of the recipients. The young man opened the box, took out the sterling silver tie tack, said thanks and then with a wide grin proudly put the service pin in his ear lobe, not his label.

People are different and we should never be too quick to judge potential by appearance or life style. The business firm is a place where diversity should be promoted. The leader's responsibility is to set the tone and to provide an environment where different people can contribute as part of a whole and so to strengthen the group and achieve unity in diversity.

This is not always an easy task. In fact, during the period of my leadership, as I sought to expand opportunities for women and minorities, I set a standard for the senior officers of the company. The standard was simply that for every open position, they first had to seek a woman or a minority to fill the position. It was a controversial position to take and not always understood within the organization. It opened up the doors of opportunity at the officer level and other levels of the Company for a group of people that historically had not had those opportunities. On the other hand, it also limited the opportunity for well-qualified white males.

Was I right or wrong in so leading? Ethical decisions are not always black and white and not always popular. In some situations, there is no one best solution. As we live and work in an imperfect world, there will be moral ambiguities and judgments will have to be made.

Learning to do what is right can sometimes come from a painful mistake of doing what is wrong. Implicit in leadership is the power to make decisions that

affect others. You can be right in your intent and in the decision but be wrong in how you use power to implement that decision. The pain of honestly facing your mistakes and seeking forgiveness is part of the learning process of doing what is right.

The mistakes I have made as a leader that hurt the most are those that have resulted in breached relationship with others. In seeking to achieve specific performance goals, I have at times pressed too hard for a result without understanding the subjective factors of fear, insecurity, or risk of failure that were influencing substandard performance of the individual involved. I have learned that people put in a corner must fight or crumble and the rightness of my position can be lost in the defeat of the person .

I had such a painful experience with one of our senior officers. His employment was eventually terminated and the Board supported my decision. The case ended up in court. There were no real winners. Yes, it would have been different if I had taken the time to understand why the person acted the way he did. In the process of winning what I thought was right, I had broken a relationship.

As we seek to do that which is right, we should never assume that what we have in position or achievement or success is for ourselves. In God's system of fairness and justice, why should any of us be preferred?

As I have traveled over the years and visited various areas of this world, I realize that I have been given much. Why wasn't I born on the garbage hill of Cairo, Egypt? Why wasn't I one of the orphans of Africa suffering the pain caused by Aids and the death of my two parents? Why wasn't I born in Eastern Europe or Russia shaped by a culture still infected with the evils and corruption of Communism?

As I reflect upon this reality, I have concluded that the only reason I have something that somebody else doesn't have – whether that something is represented in money, possessions, education, talent, title, or position – is for me to use, share, and invest so that it will benefit others and represent the message of love and redemption of my Lord and Savior.

I can't live a bifurcated life. The business firm is my channel of distribution for fulfilling and living my faith – a channel that for me has reached from the janitor's closet in Saudi Arabia to the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, China – from sweeping streets in Osaka, Japan to ringing the bell of the New York Stock Exchange. The marketplace provides a wonderful opportunity for

Christians to embrace this world but not be entangled – if they know what they believe and why they believe it and speak our faith by their actions, and so to bring alive the reality that our Lord and Savior lived and died for a purpose – that those He created and loved may know Him as God and Savior.

As we integrate our faith with our learning, God also is calling us to integrate our faith with our living. I hope and trust that many of you will find your way into corporate America and touch it with your life and leadership in a way measured not just by the profits and wealth you create but by the changed lives of the people you touch.

I am reminded of C. S. Lewis' lines when he said: "There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations - they are mortal and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat, but it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub and exploit." And so we are challenged. I challenge you to embrace the world of business. Know what ought to be and do it.

* * *

Revised 4/01/04