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A Common Ground in a Divided World

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**TAYLOR UNIVERSITY
UPLAND, INDIANA
WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 8, 1997**

“A COMMON GROUND IN A DIVIDED WORLD”

**C. William Pollard, Chairman
The ServiceMaster Company
Downers Grove, Illinois**

This is an important time for each of you. You are coming to the conclusion of your senior year in college. That penetrating question, “What are you going to do when you get out of school?” keeps coming from a variety of directions and with more frequency as graduation draws near.

The organizers of this interterm have chosen the theme, “Finding a Common Ground in an Increasingly Divided World,” with a special emphasis today on Business and Consumerism. The world you are about to enter is certainly divided, and there are many forces designed to encourage you to consume more.

Hunter, a sociologist from the University of Virginia, has called it a time of cultural wars, where people living and working in the same communities are in basic disagreement about who they are, where they have come from, and what is right and wrong in how they conduct their lives. Arthur Schlesinger, the historian from Harvard, has concluded that our current penchant for identifying and promoting ethnic, cultural, and racial differences is contributing what he calls the disuniting of America.

We are no longer a melting pot. There is a growing gap in our country and in the world between those who have money and what it can buy and those who do not.

Consumerism has extended beyond the acquisition of things, and the hot items today are intangibles: time and information.

The rapid expansion of technology has allowed us to turn our homes into offices; entertainment, educational, and purchasing centers. You can now sit before your home computer and purchase everything from groceries to automobiles, plan your next vacation, access libraries all over the world; and with a link to your TV or stereo system, order up the latest in entertainment.

It is a world of accelerated change and choice. In business, we have concluded that we really can't plan for the future; the best we can do is plan for change. Our choices today are now multiplying at exponential rates.

So in this fast-paced, changing world, what is on the mind of the average American consumer? As some of you may know, a portion of our business involves providing services ranging from lawn care, pest control, maid service, and appliance maintenance and repair to over 6 million home owners. Recently we commissioned a study to find out just what the consumer was thinking about.

In general, they were concerned and confused about the present, uncertain about the future, and skeptical about solutions to either. Specifically, over 70 percent had money concerns relating mostly to their credit card debt. 52 percent worried about their

jobs in an environment of down-sizing and reengineering. 41 percent were stressed out over family matters relating to marriage or children.

There was confusion and frustration about roles. Males are no longer the sole breadwinner, a role historically identified with masculinity. It is now a woman's job too. Women are frustrated over the breadth of their responsibilities. They are a wage earner, but also mom, wife, the CEO of the household, and for many, still expected to clean up after everyone else.

83 percent of the consumers interviewed have concluded that young people can no longer take it for granted that they will be better off than their parents. 64 percent believe that their wealth is limited and they are not likely to be better off than they are now.

Listening to music, reading or watching television--not exercising--got the highest ratings for relieving stress.

The consumer feels like he or she is time poor and wants to streamline their lives, make them more simple. Fast-food restaurants and services in and around the home are viewed as solutions.

Children are increasingly influencing the buying pattern of parents. They are tuned into social issues such as the environment, racial discrimination, and their exposure to violence and sex at an early age is accepted. Their value systems seem to be influenced more by outside forces than parents or the family.

Now, as one steps back from this broad view of the world and the American consumer mind-set, is there anything further that can be said about our own sub-culture, if you will, the evangelical culture?

A personal opinion is all I have to offer.

I believe that in an increasingly secularized society where we are encouraged to accept all forms of variant human behavior and where there is a diminishing respect for the sanctity of a life, we need more avenues of alliance, not difference, with those who may not understand or identify with the evangelical label but who have a like starting point, a faith in God through the work of His Son, Jesus Christ. However, as evangelicals, we seem to continue our propensity to define and divide and exclude.

Sometimes our theology can so damn the sinner and pagan, that there is no room in our thinking to understand or appreciate a person's creativity or potential to contribute. We can become blinded to the fact that all people have been created in the image and likeness of God and the polluting effect of sin does not completely remove this reality.

In our penchant to protect the truth, we can subtly or sometimes overtly encourage a mentality of circling the wagons and encourage withdrawing from the world, whether that be represented by the academy of thought, in both arts and sciences, the marketplace of ideas and opportunities, or the political reality of the governments we live under.

God has called us to be in the world, although not part of it; and He has provided us the example of the Incarnation as the model of the expected intensity and scope of such involvement. He has called us to be excellent in what we do, whatever the task, job,

profession, or ministry. As I say this, I am reminded of the word of our Father God when on the sixth day He saw all that He had made and that it was very good. He had done an excellent job.

When we excel in what we do, whatever that may be, as a doctor, lawyer, teacher, minister, parent, or spouse, we live our faith in a way that cannot be ignored or contained. When we proclaim our faith and do not live it, we sow the seeds of cynicism and rejection.

As we launch ourselves in the world, we should expect what Stephen Carter has referred to as a culture of disbelief, where the subject of God or faith in God is not something you talk about openly and is considered by most intelligent adults as a relic of the past.

But don't be frightened by the task. God will be with you. My pattern of involvement has stretched over three careers. After graduating from college, I went to Northwestern Law School and then practiced law for eight years, specializing in corporate and tax law. As a young lawyer, I was seeking to achieve excellence in my profession, but it was coming at the expense of my family and my church. It was, in fact, becoming a jealous mistress in my life, and it took the direct involvement of God through a serious illness to stop me in my tracks. During my time of recovery, I was visited regularly by the president of my alma mater, and he encouraged me in my faith and my desire to seek balance in my life. He also encouraged me to join him at Wheaton and serve there in the administration and faculty. It would be a big change, reduced income,

and giving up my role as a partner in the law firm. But God seemed to be pushing me through that open door. It was what He wanted me to do. I spent five years at Wheaton; and when my specific assignment was over, I was ready to go back to the practice of law. But it was at that point that I was recruited to join the leadership team of ServiceMaster 20 years ago.

We are a company that has grown very rapidly, doubling in size every three to three-and-a-half years. We are more than 25 times larger than we were when I first joined the firm in 1977. We are a public company listed on the New York Stock Exchange, with customer level revenues now in excess of \$5 billion. Our services are provided in the United States, Canada, and 30 foreign countries.

Yes, I live in one of those pressure-cooker environments where our performance, revenue and profits must be reported quarter by quarter and where revenue and profits have always been up every quarter for the past 25 years, and now we have added one more year. The shareholders that my partner Carlos Cantu and I are responsible to as leaders vote every day on our leadership. They have a choice to buy, hold, or sell.

But what I am suggesting here today is that the measure of my success as a leader in this firm should not be limited to the calculation of a total return on the value of our shares or the profit we produce. The answer must come from the more than 230,000 people whom we manage or employ that are making it happen every day as they serve others.

Much of our business may be classified as routine and mundane. We do such things as clean toilets and floors, maintain boilers and air-handling units, serve food, kill bugs, care for lawns and landscapes, clean carpets, provide maid service, and repair home appliances. The task before us is to train and motivate people to serve so they will do a more effective job, be more productive in their work, and yes even be better people. For us, this is both a management and a leadership challenge. It is more than a job or a means to earn a living. It is, in fact, a way of life or a mission.

When you visit the headquarters of our firm, and I know a number of you have done so, you will find a low, long, tan-colored building, located west of the city of Chicago. When you walk into the large, two-story lobby, on your right is a curving marble wall, 90 feet long and 18 feet high. Carved in stone on that wall in letters 8 feet high are four statements that constitute our objectives: To Honor God In All We Do, To Help People Develop, To Pursue Excellence, and To Grow Profitably.

If you were to tour the rest of the building, you would notice that nearly all of the work spaces are moveable. Most of the walls do not reach to the ceiling. Practically everything in the building is changeable and adaptable, just like the marketplace we serve with its changing demands and opportunities.

But the marble wall conveys a permanency that does not change. The principles carved in this stone are lasting. The first two objectives are end goals. The second two are means goals. As we seek to implement these objectives in the operation of our business, they provide for us a reference point for seeking to do that which is right and

avoiding that which is wrong. They remind us that every person has been created in the image of God with dignity and worth and great potential. They become the basis for our single-minded focus on people as individuals, not just part of a protected group or a particular classification.

It does not mean that everything will be done right. We experience our share of mistakes. But because of a stated standard and reason for that standard, we cannot hide our mistakes. They are flushed out in the open for correction and, in some cases, for forgiveness.

Nor is it a standard that can be used as a simplistic reason for financial success. It cannot be applied like some mathematical formula. It does, however, provide a foundation, a reference point for action. It is a living set of principles that allow us to confront the difficulties and failures that are all part of running a business, with the assurance that our common starting point never changes.

In a diverse and pluralistic society, some may question whether our first objective belongs as part of a public company's purpose statement. But regardless of where you are with respect to this objective, the principle that can be embraced by all is where it leads us, and that is to the dignity and worth and potential of every person. For us, this is fundamental to understanding the purpose of the firm. For me as a Christian and one who has put his faith and trust in Jesus Christ, it provides a wonderful opportunity not only to talk about my faith, but to live my faith.

With these objectives, we are shouting to the world that God does have a relevance to the work environment where not everyone has the same religious faith or a member of a particular denomination, church, or synagogue. We are proclaiming that God does have a relevance to a work environment where people are earning money and making a profit. We are affirming that God does have a relevance to a work environment where performance and results are the accepted standard of accountability.

Not everyone will understand the purpose and meaning of our objectives. Listen to a letter I recently received from one of our shareholders:

“While I firmly support the right of an individual to his religious convictions or pursuits, I totally fail to appreciate the concept that ServiceMaster is in fact a vehicle for the work of God. The multiple references to this effect, in my opinion, do not belong in an annual business report. To interpret a service for profit, which is what ServiceMaster does, as a work of God is an incredible presumption. Furthermore, to make a profit is not a sin. I urge that next year’s business report be confined to just that--business.”

So how would you answer this shareholder? What would you say in response to the question, what is the common point between God and profit? The link, I believe, is people. Not just Christians, but all people created in God’s image. We are not a Christian company. We have officers who are Christian, but we also have officers who

are Muslim, Jewish, or of no professed faith. We are sometimes criticized, as this shareholder did, for our mixing of God and profit, but seldom for our performance.

These objectives set the standard for those of us who profess faith in Christ as we seek to walk the talk. Yes, not only to integrate our faith with our learning, but to integrate our faith with what we do, with our actions as we work with others. Let me share with you two recent examples.

Several weeks ago, I attended a memorial service for one my colleagues in ServiceMaster. Bob Brondyke had come to that point of life where the question of what's it all about was a reality. At a relatively young age of 44, he learned he had terminal cancer. He died six months later. Bob was an officer of ServiceMaster responsible for a five-state region. He spent a good bit of his time during the week on the road away supporting our services to customers. He had a wife and two lovely children, Rob 20, a sophomore in college, and Matt 18, a senior in high school. The memorial service was unique. It was conducted primarily by his friends in ServiceMaster. They not only talked about Bob's faith in God, but also how that affected the way he treated people and influence them. Bob's young son also participated in the memorial service and made a very significant statement when he said that as he looked back at his father's life for the past 20 years, there was nothing more he could ask of his father than what his father had given him. Bob had worked hard in his job and achieved excellence as a manager and a leader. But he had also developed his faith and influenced others including the nurturing and care for his family. He had involved his faith in all walks of life.

Another example is Shu Zhang. Shu was raised and educated in China, indoctrinated in communism, and is now working with us to help develop our business for this market. Listen to this letter I recently received from her:

Dear Bill:

I felt so much need to talk to you since I came back from management seminar.

When I grew up in China, religions were forbidden and the communists taught us religion was superstition. Mao's book became our bible. When I was five or six years old, I could recite Mao's quotations and even use them to judge and lecture the kids in the neighborhood. Mao said serve the people. Leaders should be public servants. This coincides with some of ServiceMaster's moral standard. When I think deeply, I see the difference which makes one work so successfully and the other collapses fatally. It must be the starting point of ServiceMaster to honor God, and that every individual has been created in his image with dignity and worth.

Ten years ago in China, people were not allowed to think and speak freely. Those who held different opinions and views with the government were treated as the enemy, and enemies were not treated as human beings any more. When people found out Mao was just another Chinese emperor, we lost our believing. This is a generation who had been brainwashed since

we were born. When I went to Beijing last March with you and Ralph, I met with my high school classmates. They talked a lot about the consumer oriented Chinese young people. We have heard a lot of excitement about the big change in the Chinese economy which brought tremendous opportunities, but this also worried us about a generation without beliefs and moral standards.

ServiceMaster is designed to be a big, tall tree with strong roots which penetrate extensively to almost every corner of a person's daily life. It is still growing, and I am still searching."

I hope and pray that as part of Shu's searching, she will find the Lord I love. But for her to be attracted, she had to be first included and accepted. She is part of the world that God so loved for whom He gave His only begotten Son.

So, for me business is not just a game of manipulation that accomplishes a series of tasks for a profit, with the gain going to a few, the atrophy of the soul of the person producing the results. People are not just economic animals or non personal production units. Nor can they be simply lumped as evangelical Protestants, Baptists or Presbyterians. Every person is created in the image of God, with their own fingerprint of personality and potential. As a leader in business, it is my responsibility to provide an environment that unlocks that potential and as a Christian to so walk the talk and share my faith so that they will seek the same Savior I love.

Is there a common ground in a divided world? Yes, there is. It is people. The people God created. And they are everywhere; in fact, they are even cross-cultural.

What are you going to do when you get out of school? I hope some of you will be encouraged to be involved in the market place. For the past 20 years it has been a full-time ministry for me. The market place needs Christian young people. Young people who are confident, who are striving for excellence, who are seeking to contribute and achieve high marks in serving the customer. But also young people who know who they are, who care about the people they work with, who care about them as eternal beings, with a soul that must be saved. It is that side of us that C. S. Lewis referred to 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 we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit."

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