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# Leading in Turbulent Times

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**2002 PASTORS' CONFERENCE  
PLENARY SESSION - AFTERNOON  
REGENT COLLEGE, VANCOUVER BC  
MAY 7, 2002**

**“LEADING IN TURBULENT TIMES”**

**C. WILLIAM POLLARD**

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Our leadership challenge and opportunity in these changing and somewhat turbulent times - and tonight I focus on the challenges and opportunities of bringing these two worlds of God and profit together. (this was a revised sentence and is not really complete)

We live in changing and turbulent times. The world before us is one of accelerated change and choice. The speed of change combined with a growing variety of choices brings a certain fluidity and uncertainty to life. It is affecting the way we live, the decisions we make and the operation and very existence of the organizations and institutions that we have established to provide order and structure to our societies.

The shock waves that have occurred over the last eight months have reminded us of this reality. War can now be waged by an enemy other than a nation state, an enemy that is difficult to identify and find, and that is committed to a fanatical, suicidal sacrifice of life in implementing their objectives. Building a strong defense against the standard instruments of war becomes irrelevant in such an environment. Our military response may

have resulted in a form of victory in Afghanistan but not a resolution of the basic problem.

The turmoil between the state of Palestine and the nation of Israel reflects ethnic and religious hatreds that reach back thousands of years.

What motivates young people to wire themselves up into becoming a human bomb? Why must the response force kill and injure so many non-combatants?

As we see this turbulence in the political arena, at the same time in the world of commerce, we have recently witnessed the rapid decline and bankruptcy of several large corporations with resulting loss of jobs and depletion of shareholder value. And we have seen the collapse of one of the world's largest accounting firms whose reputation was once like sterling on silver. Were these just the result of those age-old evils of greed and deceit or did the compounding forces of globalization and technology add a new dimension that resulted in a greater economic loss in a shorter period of time - a result that may be beyond regulation or prediction?

In such a time and in such a world, people are increasingly searching for meaning and purpose in life and in work. When everything else is moving and uncertainty abounds, people need anchors they can hold on to.

Now, as we come here together as Christians, followers of Jesus Christ, people of the book all know there are timeless values that we can rely upon as we seek to navigate through the tensions and cross currents of this

sea of change and choice? The issue is not so much in defining or knowing our faith – but more in applying and living our faith.

The action is not so much in the sanctuary as it is in the highways and byways of life.

Now, as people ask and seek to understand a purpose and meaning in life, they are, in fact, exercising the art of being human. In so doing, they need to recognize that humanity is not only physical and rational, but is also moral and spiritual. It is the spiritual side of our humanity that influences our character – our ability to determine right or wrong, to recognize good or evil, to make moral judgments, to love or to hate, and to develop a philosophy of life – a world view if you will – that can provide a stability and point of reference that does not change.

In the past, most cultures have recognized certain moral and/or religious standards as a guide or reference point for human behavior and as a check and balance for the exercise of power and authority. Are these standards of the past applicable to the future? In our fast-paced changing post-modern world, is there still room for the development of the character or spiritual side of the person?

In an increasingly global environment, what do we do if certain spiritual or moral standards result in conflict between cultures or people groups, with some being labeled true believers and others infidels? Are there values that are not only timeless but also cross-cultural?

Now there is much about what is occurring around us involving both change and choice that is exciting – that is pregnant with opportunity. It is not all doom and gloom. Some of the more remarkable changes have been caused by advances in technology. The availability of information has brought about a new transparency and openness that is affecting the way we conduct our lives and understand each other. Closed societies are, for the most part, relics of the past. The ability to contain or control information as part of exercising power is no longer the tool of manipulation that it once was.

E-mail, e-commerce, the internet were not part of our general vocabulary as we began the decade of the 90s. Today, we can hold a computer in the palm of our hand and gain instant access to information sources all over the world and communicate with our friends and business associates at any time and wherever they may be located.

In North America, the rapid expansion of information technology also has allowed us to turn our homes or living quarters into offices, entertainment, educational and purchasing centers. We can sit before our computer and purchase everything from groceries to automobiles, plan our next vacation, access libraries, educational resources and courses of instruction and, with a link to a TV, order up the latest in entertainment or even go to church..

While this provides more opportunity for choice of information and entertainment, it also can be debilitating if one becomes consumed in the

fantasy of a **virtual** world without the personal touch of another person and without feeling the consequences of responsible behavior.

This mobility and flexibility of access to information also is changing how we look at work and where work can be accomplished. We are now able to move work to where the worker is instead of always requiring the worker to come to work. Modems can go almost anywhere and in some environments plugs and wires are no longer necessary. But how will this new flexibility of where we work help us be more civil, more social, more caring for others?

Technology is not only affecting the way we communicate; it also is affecting our physiology. The developments of modern day medicine, genetics and understanding of healthy diets has already improved the longevity of our lives, increased our body size, and expanded the efficiency and durability of our vital organs.

We now have choices of life and death, choices of cloning, choices of using stem cells of an embryo that has been formed to die so that others may live. How do we make these choices going forward? What standards do we use? And as we perfect the science of health care, how will we face the growing problems resulting from what is often referred to as the subjective diseases, such as depression, substance abuse, eating disorders? All of these “medical disorders” affect a person’s well being and ability to function. They go beyond the physical and the rational. They touch the emotional – yes, even the spiritual side of a person.

The forces of change and choice also are having a profound effect upon the economics of every nation and the world. There is a growing interdependence between and among national economies. At the same time, there is a growing disparity in the distribution of income between the wealthy nations and the underdeveloped nations.

The impact of technology and the growing importance of information, education and knowledge have had a compounding effect upon this disparity. This is because the wealth creation formula of today and the future is more dependent upon the training and development of human capital than the availability of land or reproducible material assets. This human capital factor is estimated by most economists to have a value that is twice as great as any physical or financial resource.

In many underdeveloped nations and economies, the infrastructures are not in place to accelerate the process of learning and provide access to the current explosion of knowledge and information. The result is that in a global economy, these nations are at a disadvantage in developing human capital. They cannot compete at the same level and there is a growing cycle of poverty, despair, frustration, and hatred.

We must find new and better solutions to this problem of global economic inequality, but as we do so, we should not forget lessons from our own culture. Issues of injustice, frustration, hatred and violence cannot be improved solely by raising levels of income. The problems of drug addiction, alcoholism, rape, battery of women and children, violent death and crimes are generally more severe in the more wealthy nations than they

were 100 years ago. These issues are prevalent at all income levels of our society.

The message is simple yet profound. People cannot be understood solely in economic terms or their physical needs, or measured simply by their intellectual or educational accomplishments. There is a spiritual and moral dimension to life that also needs to be nurtured and developed.

How then do we develop the moral and spiritual side of a person in this new changing world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Our educational institutions and our families and homes should continue to be primary sources for this development. However, a number of these institutions are under stress, and some have limited their direct involvement in character or moral development. The church has and must continue to play an important role – an expanded role – a role that equips, encourages and motivates their people to integrate their faith with their work – to take the theology, the definition of their faith and apply them as the problems and opportunities of a fast-paced changing world.

The majority of your congregation will be spending most of their waking hours in the work environment, why shouldn't the development of human character and moral behavior also be an integral part of this environment?

In his classic, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber concluded that the Protestant Reformation was one of the driving forces for the growth of capitalism. He also observed, however, that by the



beginning of the twentieth century the growing bureaucracy of large business organizations had assumed control over the worker. The worker becomes part of a machine of production trapped in what Weber described as the “iron cage”, without hope of relating the specifics of the work task to the process of human development or even to the glorifying of God. The worker no longer had a choice to be “Called”. Work had become just a matter of survival.

So now, almost a hundred years after the failure of the grand experiment of Marx and Lenin and their followers, and in light of the reality that the free market system is alive and functioning in most parts of the world, how are we to view the role of the business organization and its leadership in developing the whole person, including the moral and spiritual side of the person – and where does the church fit in?

How do working people find a sense of purpose or meaning in their work? Develop a strong ethic that extends to the care of their family and sets a standard for right and wrong? A sense of community and a willingness to give back and practice charity? A willingness to engage in diversity? A capacity to resist the lure of hedonism? A sense of discipline and a commitment to truth? A desire for continuing education, learning and acquiring more knowledge? A respect for the dignity and worth of every person and a love for their fellow workers and their neighbor? A willingness to serve as they lead? These are some of the timeless values that must continue to be taught and developed in our society. They become the foundation for character and moral development.

Robert Fogel, an economics professor from the University of Chicago and a 1993 Nobel Prize winner, agrees. In his recent book *The Fourth Great Awakening*, he traces the history of religious faith in America from pre-Revolutionary War times to the present. He analyzes the effect of religion and moral values upon issues in our society, in our businesses and in our economy. He concludes that the biggest issue today in the culture of the United States is not a lack of employment opportunities or the distribution of economic resources, nor is it the lack of diversity or economic opportunity. In his opinion, there is a lack of what he refers to as the distribution of spiritual resources and spiritual assets. There is, he concludes, a void in our society in the development of the character and the spiritual dimension of people.

In his recent book *The Death of Character*, James Hunter, a noted sociologist from the University of Virginia, concluded that while people in North America are as capable of developing character as they ever were in the past, there are now few cultural or institutional guidelines in our society that call for its cultivation or maintenance. The reason, he suggests, is because our society has lost its ability to generate a consensus of moral authority.

While I am not as pessimistic as Hunter, I do recognize that there is a void and in my judgment it reflects a lack of leadership.

The Biblical standards of right and wrong have provided timeless truths and standards for developing character as well as a sense of purpose and well-being. The missing ingredient is not the lack of a basis for

consensus, but instead it is leadership – leadership by way of example – leadership that refuses to accept a bifurcation between the sacred and the secular – leadership that will work wherever it may be, including the marketplace or a full-time ministry.

If Weber’s thesis is correct and the business firm was responsible for dehumanizing the worker as part of a machine of production at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, can it play a more positive role as we begin the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Can the business firm be a moral community for the development of human character and behavior? Can it participate in the distribution of spiritual assets? Why shouldn’t leadership make a difference?

Now as I ask these questions, I do so not as a philosopher, educator, political or religious leader, but simply a businessperson. Someone who during the past 25 years has participated in the leadership of a growing and dynamic service company that we call ServiceMaster. Today we serve more than 12 million residential and commercial customers with one or more of our services and we are located in the United States and Canada and in 47 foreign countries. We employ more than 50,000 people and teach and train many more as part of our extended service network.

We are a public company and our shares are listed on the NY stock exchange. Yes, we have been a company of change and growth. We have doubled in size every 3 ½ - 4 years and over 90% of what we are doing today we were not doing just ten short years ago. We have not only added many new businesses during this period, but also closed or sold some. In the

last nine months we experiences the trauma and emotion of selling one of the original businesses of ServiceMaster which now will no longer be part of our future.

As a business firm, we want to excel at generating profits and creating value for our shareholders. If we don't want to play by these rules, we don't belong in the ballgame. But we also are seeking to be a community, to help shape human character and moral behavior, an open community where the questions of a person's spiritual development, the existence of God and how one relates his or her faith with their work, are issues of discussion, debate and, yes, even learning and understanding.

The objectives of our Company are simply stated: To honor God in all we do; to help people develop; to pursue excellence; and to grow profitably. Those 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, regardless of faith, choice, label, gender or race, has been created in the image of God with dignity and worth. Every person has his or her own fingerprint of potential and their work and service to others can become part of a positive process in who they are becoming. The development of their character and moral behavior is part of our business of business.

Peter Drucker's classic definition of management is getting the right things done through others. But what I am suggesting today is that the business firm and its leadership should not stop there. They also should be concerned about what is happening to the person in the process. The people who are producing the profits are also human. The issue is not just what they are doing but also what they are becoming.

Now for me as a Christian, a follower of Jesus Christ and also a leader in business, it has meant that I must live my faith in such a way that it is not imposed upon my colleagues and fellow workers but instead can be examined, tested, understood and, in some cases, embraced by them as they seek not only to do things right but also to do the right thing.

One of the best ways that I have found to do this is to seek to serve as I have led and to reflect the principle that Jesus taught His disciples as He washed their feet – no leader is greater than the people he or she leads and that even the humblest of tasks is worthy of a leader to do. Servant leadership has been a learning experience for me. It has not come naturally.

To do so, I **first** had to understand what it meant to walk in the shoes of those I would lead. This was a lesson that I would learn as part of joining the team at ServiceMaster over 25 years ago.

My predecessors Ken Hansen, who was then Chairman of the Company, and Ken Wessner, who was President and CEO of the Company, were both involved in recruiting me to join the firm. They wanted me to

come and head up the legal and financial affairs of the Company, reporting directly to Ken Wessner.

In the selling of the job, they suggested that I, along with others, would be considered in the future for the CEO position of the Company.

The interviewing process took several months and as we were coming to what I thought was the final interview to confirm compensation and starting date, I decided that I needed to know more about what it would take to be CEO of ServiceMaster. As I pressed the point and tried to get some assurance of how I could become CEO, Ken Hansen stood up and said the interview was over. Ken Wessner led me to the front door. As I left ServiceMaster, I concluded that it was over – I had blown the opportunity.

A few days later, Ken Hansen called me on the phone and asked me if I wanted to have breakfast with him to discuss what had happened in the interview. I accepted the offer and at breakfast he made clear to me his teachable point of view. He simply said: Bill, if you want to come to ServiceMaster to contribute and serve, you will have a great future. But if your coming is dependent upon a title, position or ultimately the CEO position, then you will be disappointed. It is up to you.

The point was simple. Never give a job or a title to a person who can't live without it. Leaders in ServiceMaster, to be successful, must have or develop a true servant's heart. I took the job and Ken, in his own way, tested me at the front end. I spent the first six weeks in ServiceMaster out cleaning floors and doing maintenance work, which is all part of our service

business. There were lessons for me to learn, the most important of which was – as a leader **I needed to be a servant, and that I should never ask someone to do something I was not first willing to do.**

**Second**, a servant leader must believe and trust in the people he or she leads and should always be ready to be surprised by their potential. A friend and mentor of mine tells of an experience that has been a great reminder to me of this point. It is often the custom of firms to hand out service pins in recognition of years of service. As 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 beautiful sterling silver service pin that was to be used as a tie tack and said thanks, and with a wide grin proudly put the service pin in his earlobe not on his lapel.

People are different, and we should never be too quick to judge potential by appearance or lifestyle. The firm at work is a place where diversity should be promoted. It is the leader's responsibility to set the tone, to learn to accept the differences of people, and to seek to provide an environment where different people contribute as part of the whole and so to strengthen the group, and achieve unity in diversity. It is not the role of a Christian who also is a leader in business to define or defend his or her faith or to label or categorize people into groups of believers or non-believers. It is, instead, a role of accepting differences in order to relate one's faith by what they do as much as by what they say.

**Third**, servant leaders should make themselves available. Their door should always be open. They should be out and about talking and listening

to people at all levels of the organization. At our headquarters building in Downers Grove, we have designed our executive offices as a reminder of this principle of listening, learning and serving. Nobody works behind closed doors; glass is everywhere, confirming our desire to have an open office and open mind. No executive office captures an outside window. The view to the outside is available to all working in the office.

**Fourth**, the servant leader must be committed, not a bystander or simply a holder of position. He or she is there for the long-term. No enterprise can function to its capacity nor can its people expect a healthy organizational culture unless they can rely upon the covenants and commitments of their leaders. This goes beyond the covenants usually contained in an employment agreement or in a legal document. It extends to the people who day-by-day are relying upon the leader for their future. It is fulfilling a leader's campaign promises. It is the leader's obligation or, as some have described it, "their posture of indebtedness".

**Fifth**, servant leaders have a love and care for the people they lead. They must treat people as the subject of work – not just the object of work.

Several years ago, I was traveling in what was then the Soviet Union. I had been asked to give several lectures at major universities on the service business and our company objectives. While I was in the city then called Leningrad, now renamed St. Petersburg, I met Olga. She had the job of mopping the lobby floor in a large hotel, which at that time was occupied mostly by people from the West. I took an interest in her and her tasks.



With the help of an interpreter, I engaged her in conversation and noted the tools she had to work with.

Olga had been given a t-frame for a mop, a filthy rag and a bucket of dirty water to do her job. She really wasn't cleaning the floor; she was just moving dirt from one section to the other. The reality of Olga's job was to do the least amount of motions in the greatest amount of time until the day was over. Olga was not proud of what she was doing. She had no dignity in her work. She was a long way from owning the results.

I knew from our brief conversation that there was a great unlocked potential in Olga. I'm sure you could have eaten off the floor of her two-room apartment. But work was something different. No one had taken the time to teach or equip Olga. No one had taken the time to care about her as a person. She was lost in a system that did not care. Work was just a job that had to be done. **She was the object of work, not its subject.**

I contrast the time spent with Olga with an experience I had just a few days later while visiting a hospital we serve in London. As I was introduced to one of the housekeepers, Kamula, as Chairman of ServiceMaster, she put her arms around me, gave me a big hug and thanked me for the training and tools she had received to do her work. She then showed me all that she had accomplished in cleaning patient rooms, providing a detailed before and after description. She was proud of her work. She owned the result. Why? Because someone had cared enough to show her the way and recognize her for her accomplishments. She had dignity in her work. She was looking forward to her next accomplishment. She was thankful.

What was the difference between these two people? Yes, one was born in Moscow, the other New Dehli, and their race and language and nationalities were different, but their basic tasks were the same. They both had to work for a living. They both had modest and limited financial resources. One was very proud of what she was doing. Her work had affected her view of herself and others. The other was not, and she had a limited view of her potential and worth.

The difference, I suggest, has something to do with how they were treated, loved and cared for in their work environment. In one case, the mission of the organization involved the development of the person. In the other case the objective was to provide activity and call it work.

So will the business leader of the future who also is a Christian please stand up? Not the president or the person with the most distinguished title or the longest tenure, but the role model. Not the highest paid person in the group, but the risk taker. Not the person with the largest car or the biggest home, but the servant. Not the person who promotes himself or herself, but the promoter of others. Not the administrator, but the initiator. Not the taker, but the giver. Not the talker, but the listener.

Leadership is both an art and a science. The results of a servant leader will be measured beyond the workplace. The story will be told in the changed lives of people. As we seek to lead and develop an organization of people as a moral community, we should recognize that it is not always comfortable. At times it feels like you are in a rowboat in the middle of an

ocean. There will always be an audience of skeptics with questions raised regarding the appropriateness of mixing one's faith with one's work environment.

For me, the common link between my faith and my work is people - people who can love or hate, produce or destroy; people who, in their work, are in the process of becoming somebody. People who are whole people, not just a pair of hands or the cost of doing business. People who have an eternity before them. There are timeless and, yes, cross-cultural values and they are the channel markers for navigating, leading and contributing during these turbulent times. Leadership can make a difference. Leadership that knows who they are and what they believe. Leadership that is prepared to serve. The author of our faith chose to become like us – to assume our humanity that we may know Him. He provides a role model of how we should integrate our faith with what we do, with how we work.

It was C. S. Lewis who 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.” What is business without people? What is a world without God? Listen to these lines from T. S. Eliot's *Choruses from a Rock*.

“What life have you if you not have life together?

There is no life that is not in community.

And no community not lived in praise of God.

And now you live dispersed on ribbon roads.

And no man knows or cares who is his neighbor,  
Unless his neighbor makes too much disturbance.  
And the wind shall say, here were decent Godless people.  
Their only monument the asphalt road,  
And a thousand lost golf balls.  
Can you keep the city that the Lord keeps not with you?  
A thousand policemen directing the traffic,  
And not tell you why you come, or where you go.  
When the stranger says: “What is the meaning of this city?”  
Do you huddle close together because you love each other?  
What will you answer? We all dwell together,  
To make money from each other? Is this a community?  
And the stranger will depart and return to the desert.  
Oh my soul be prepared for the coming of the stranger.  
Be prepared for him who knows how to ask questions.

As pastors – as leaders of the church, how will you make a difference?  
How can you take the gospel and life of Jesus Christ and help it to live in  
what your corporation **does** Monday to Friday? Do you know and  
understand what this means in a world of accelerated change and choice? A  
world that defines tolerance as a (supreme??) value? A world that is made  
up of many different people, all created in God’s image. Are they prepared  
to serve – are you prepared to serve? Listen to these words from James  
Smith, who was one of our service managers and who, four years ago, was  
walking the streets of Chicago as a homeless person.

James has something to tell us about what he learned in the workplace about his faith and his responsibility to give back.

Here show the James Smith video

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