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Open for Business (Short Version)

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Open for Business

Lecture at Covenant College

January 29, 2007

C. William Pollard

It is a special privilege for me to be here today and participate in this inaugural lecture named in honor of Dr. Frank Brock. He is a person I admire and respect, and one who has shared some of the same journeys of life that I have, including serving in business and in leadership of a Christian college. His life has been a response to the call of God and His sovereignty in the work of family, church, business, and leadership of this school. As a result, many people have been touched and encouraged to be all that God wants them to be in whatever they do or wherever they go.

I also stand here today as a grateful parent of a graduate of Covenant College. My daughter, Amy, graduated in 1990 and in addition to receiving an excellent education, there also was a romance that blossomed into a marriage. Mark and Amy have been happily married for 17 years; God has blessed them with four children and I am thankful to see they are serving the Lord they love in their home, church, and work. They also are on this journey of life responding to God's call.

As I look out at the faces of my audience this morning, I realize that for most of you, there is more than one generation of time that separates us. As I look back today and share some thoughts about how God has called me and worked in my life, you are looking forward and may have some uncertainties about God's call. Those uncertainties

are all part of the reality that life is always lived looking forward but more often than not better understood when one has the opportunity to look back.

I am sure that many of you, as I did when I was your age, are somewhat weary with those questions like “What are you going to do when you get out of school?” or “What are you going to do with the rest of your life?”

Listen to this letter I received from a graduate of a Christian college. It reflects what may be some common understandings or misunderstandings of God’s calling.

“I am very happy to report that, by God’s grace and fullness, I actually did graduate. For the first time since age five, I am not a student.

“It’s been a good four years of learning. I was an English literature major and a Bible minor. I can now read in the Greek New Testament. I know phrases like: inaugurated eschatology and hermeneutical fallacy. My interpretation of scripture has increased in both caution and confidence. I have seen God in His work and in His people.

“I have made wonderful friends here, in breakfast Bible studies and noon prayer sessions for missions, in afternoons in the fall playing football and in the spring playing baseball, and late nights in the dorm having fun. The farewells will be very difficult.

“So, what’s next? I am moving to Kansas City where I will be closer to my family. I’ll find a job and pay off my student loans. What kind of a job? I really don’t know – construction work or some type of administrative work for a business? I also will apply to various mission agencies. I feel called to the mission field and in a year or two, I hope to be in full-time Christian service. Where, I don’t know. Ethiopia? Papua New Guinea? India? I will wait for God’s call to the right place.

“Please pray for me in the next couple of months. It is going to be quite a transition and, frankly, **I am not looking forward to it.** For the first time, I am leaving the Christian community to live among **ordinary, working Americans.** I am expecting a considerable amount of uncertainty and loneliness, but I have to develop some friends at the local church I will be attending.”

Is there some form of hierarchy in God’s calling with a special place for what people often refer to as “full-time Christian service?” Will I miss out if I don’t do something that fits into this category? Should I think of God’s call in the context of a location or special place of service? Is it only about what I should do and the place where I should do it or is it more about who am I and who am I becoming? And where does ordinary work with those ordinary people fit in? The ordinary people that God so loves and that Jesus died for.

As I ask these questions, I am reminded of a friend of mine who put this message on his voicemail at work and his answering machine at home: Hello? This is not an answering device. It is a questioning device. There are only two questions in life that are relevant: “Who are you” and “What do you want?” Please give your answer after the tone.

Who are we and what do we want? Every one of us is a special creation of God with a dimension of freedom to make choices about how we shall then live. God has a purpose for our life. He is calling us both to do and to be. He is calling us to a way of life that has both a temporal and an eternal purpose. A calling that is sacred in its significance and more often than not involves the secular in its application.

What does the word of God have to say about this subject of calling? Reading this morning from Chapters 2 and 4 of Ephesians and Chapters 2 and 3 of Philippians.

Eph 2: 8, 9, 10 - For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing: it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works which God prepared before hand that we should walk in them.

Phil 2:3 – 11 - Do nothing from rivalry or conceit but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus who though He was in the form of God did not want equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made Himself nothing, taking on the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on the cross.

Eph 4: 1 - I, therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called.

Phil 2: 12, 13 - Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you both to will and to work for His good pleasure.

Phil 3: 12 – 14 - Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own because Christ Jesus has made me His own. Brother, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead. I press forward the goal for the prize of the **upward call** of God in Christ.

The principles of God's calling are clear. Our starting point is with the Caller, not the call. We are being called to someone – a relationship with God and His Son Jesus Christ. It is a call that involves who we are becoming, as we make choices about what we do.

God's call is all inclusive. It involves a purpose for life and covers every aspect of life – all of what we do. The whole of life is a response to God's call with no room for a two-tier or double- life view – a higher sacred calling or a lower more mundane calling. The motto of this school says it clearly: "In all things Christ is preeminent."

As Luther put it, the work of monks and priests, however holy, do not differ in the sight of God from the works of a laborer in the field or that of a manservant or maidservant in the home.

Calling is all about serving others, not about self-gratification. It is about excelling in what we do and so to bring honor to the One Who has called us. It involves both faith and hard work – and our choice to do both – with the results dependent not only upon our own doing but instead with the help of God.

Calling is about the journey of life. During our time here on earth, we never arrive. We are always on the road. There are way points of learning that involve

accomplishment, sadness, and failures. The final destination will come only when we are at home with our Lord.

Each of us are at various stages of that journey and there may be more who are so traveling than we may realize. Let us not forget that there is room in God's call for such different travelers as the wise men from the east, Zaccheus in the sycamore tree, and the woman at the well.

There is a priority and focus to our calling, with a race to be won. We have been chosen. We are not our own. We have been bought with a price and the bulls eye of our target for life is to seek first the Kingdom of God and His Righteousness.

As we understand more of God's calling, we realize that our quest for life is not so much what we want but instead what God wants. He wants a relationship with us. He wants to be our friend. He wants us to follow in the steps of His Son, Jesus Christ, and to be ministers of reconciliation and ambassadors of His love with a message of hope and salvation. And yes, for some of us, including Dr. Brock and me, this calling, this journey of life, has included the world of business, the marketplace where money is made, wealth is created, and where people who need to hear the message of hope and salvation spend most of their waking hours.

How then does one seek to integrate the claims of their faith with the demands of their work?

While 30 years ago it was generally considered that business and religion don't mix, there is now an open dialog in the marketplace about issues of faith and the role of God in business.

In a recently published book by Oxford University Press entitled “God at Work”, David Miller, the Executive Director of the Center for Faith and Culture at Yale University, discusses this increased interest in spirituality in the workplace. He concludes that there are a growing number of business people attending conferences and management seminars on the role of spirituality at work, participating in Bible studies at work, and also reading books, magazines, and newsletters for self-help training on how to relate biblical teaching with marketplace demands.

He notes that, for the most part, the church has been silent and non-responsive to this growing interest and desire among Christian business people to close the Sunday/Monday gap. His study further indicates that to help fill this void of silence, there has been a rapidly growing number of supporting para church organizations. He estimates that there are now more than 1200 such organizations involved in the faith/work movement.

He also expresses disappointment with his finding that, in general, the teaching faculty at seminaries and other institutions offering biblical studies continue to have pre-suppositions about capitalism, business, and the marketplace, that range from being benign to negative. On the negative side, the views portray the business community as a necessary evil, unsupportive of social justice concerns, harmful and exploitative of people and an environment, that is only interested in maximizing profits.

One of the most interesting books on this general subject is not by a Christian or a person of religious authority, but instead by an economist who is a Nobel Prize winner and a professor at the University of Chicago. In his book entitled “*The Fourth Great Awakening*”, Robert Fogel traces, from pre-Revolutionary War days to modern times, the

various religious awakenings in America and their impact on our society and economy. As a secular observer, he has determined that one of the greatest issues in our society and the world of business today is a lack of a consensus of moral authority and a lack of what he refers to as a distribution of spiritual assets or spiritual resources. He concludes that in order for the business firm of the future to resolve the growing complexity of ethical issues, it will have to acquire spiritual capital.

What he is saying is something we already know as Christians, and that is, the health and welfare of people cannot be understood or measured only in terms of their economic or physical needs. Nor can it be measured solely by their intellectual or educational accomplishments. There also is a spiritual dimension to the human condition. It is this spiritual dimension that influences moral behavior and the development of character and is the genesis of love, not hate; good, not evil. It is this spiritual dimension of people that raises the question of God and His role in both the act of creation and the act of redemption.

The business firm need not be just a place where we make money and create wealth, but it can also become a moral community for the development of human character. A community where it is ok to talk about God as one's source for moral authority.

As I have now retired from my leadership responsibilities at ServiceMaster and look back, I can add up the numbers that show growth in profits, customers served, and a return for our shareholders that on average was 20% per year. While these figures are part of a normal business assessment of performance, the conclusion for me cannot be limited to these money or value-creation measurements. The real and lasting

measurement is whether the results of my leadership can be seen in the changed and improved lives of people I led.

As a business leader, I wanted to excel at generating profits and creating value for shareholders. If I didn't want to play by these rules, I didn't belong in the ballgame. But I also tried to encourage an environment where the work place could be an open community, where the question of a person's moral and spiritual development and the existence of God and how one related the claims of their faith with the demands of their work were issues of discussion, debate and, yes, even learning understanding and acceptance. I considered the people of our firm as, in fact, the soul of the firm.

Our corporate objectives at ServiceMaster were simply stated: To honor God in all we do; To help people develop; To pursue excellence; and To grow profitably. Those first two objectives were end goals; the second two were means goals.

We did not use our first objective as a basis of exclusion. It was, in fact, the reason for our promotion of diversity as we recognized that different people with different beliefs were all part of God's mix.

It did not mean that everything was done right. We experienced our share of mistakes. We sometimes failed and did things wrong. But because of a stated standard and a reason for that standard, we could not hide our mistakes. Mistakes were regularly flushed out in the open for correction and, in some cases, for forgiveness and leaders could not protect themselves at the expense of those they were leading.

One of the best ways that I found to share my faith and lead in the development of the spiritual as well as the economic side of the firm was to seek to serve as I led. As I did

so, I was able to affirm that the interest of others came before mine and the truth of what I said and believed should be measured by what I did.

Servant leadership has been a learning experience for me. It has not come naturally. The first thing I had to understand was what it meant to walk in the shoes of those I would lead. This was a lesson that I would learn as I joined ServiceMaster, now almost 30 years ago. Prior to joining ServiceMaster, I had practiced law for 10 years and had also served as a vice president and faculty member at Wheaton College.

As I concluded my time at Wheaton and was preparing to go back to the practice of law, I was recruited by Ken Hansen, who was then Chairman of ServiceMaster, and Ken Wessner, who was the President and CEO of the Company, to consider joining the firm. They wanted me to come and initially head up the legal and financial affairs of the Company, reporting directly to Ken Wessner.

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 needed to know more about exactly what I would have to do to be CEO of this Company.

So I started pressing the two Kens 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, including:

- Never give a title or position to somebody who can't live without it.
- Determine at the front end whether the leader's self-interest or the interest of others will come first.
- Know whether the leader can define reality by being willing to do what they ask of others.

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 initial 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 200,000 people as we grew to serve over 12 million customers in 45 different countries. 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, as I became CEO of the firm, the faces of our service workers would flash across my mind as I was faced with those inevitable judgment calls between the rights and the wrongs of running a business. The integrity of my actions had to pass their scrutiny. Otherwise I was deceiving myself and those that I was committed to serve.

Servant leadership is what Jesus was seeking to teach his disciples as he took a towel and basin of water and washed their feet. Such leadership is not so much about the leader and his accomplishments. It is more about the people who follow, and the direction they are led.

Business can become a channel of distribution for fulfilling and living our faith. For me, it has become a channel that has reached from a 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 has provided a wonderful opportunity for me to embrace and engage those who do not believe the way I do, but who God loves and who, by my words and actions, should see the reality of His love.

Now, Joshua is one of those Biblical examples of a great leader. As he came to the closing days of his leadership, he called all of the tribes of Israel together and reminded them that, with God's help, they had been victorious in battles and were now occupying the Promised Land, living in cities they did not have to build and eating from

vineyards they did not have to plant and then he challenged them to fear God and serve Him with faithfulness.

It was a challenge, not a command, for God does not compel anyone to follow or worship Him. In Joshua's conclusion, he emphasized this point when he said, "But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

Now, the Hebrew word that is translated "serve" is Avodah, and can also mean worship or work. Yes, that's right – our work and our family can also be a worship to the God we love as we serve and live our faith. The business firm, where we serve customers and make money, can become a center of our worship as we bring alive the reality that Jesus lived and died for the purpose that those He created and loved may know Him as God and Savior.

As I say this, I am reminded of two quotes from C. S. Lewis. One is from *The World's Last Night* when he described God as One who "allows the . . . muscles and minds of men to cooperate in the execution of His will . . . and who seems to do nothing of Himself which He can possibly delegate to His creatures" and the other is from *The Weight of Glory* 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."

My prayer is that these words may encourage some of you to become effective leaders for Christ in the marketplace. The vocation of business can be a calling from

God, management is truly a liberal art, and profit is not the result of sin, but is part of God's economy of surplus and our responsibility of stewardship.

God has called each of us to be in the world but not part of it. He has called us to be excellent in what we do, whether we call it a job, profession or ministry, and when we excel in what we do, whatever that may be, as a lawyer, businessperson, minister or educator, we live our faith in a way that cannot be ignored or contained. However, when we proclaim our faith and do not live it, we sow seeds of cynicism and rejection.

I conclude with 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.”

* * *

January 26, 2007