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What's It All About? (Milwaukee, WI)

C. William Pollard

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**Christian Business Men's Lunch
Milwaukee, Wisconsin
November 11, 1999**

**C. William Pollard
The ServiceMaster Company
"What's It All About"**

Dickens once said "It is the best of times and the worst of times". Although this was written 140 years ago, it may well have been written today about today.

We live in a world of accelerated change and choice. During the last decade, dramatic changes have occurred in the world around us - the collapse of communism, and what was the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. The free market system has a wide open door in most areas of the world today, including China.

Technology has had a dramatic effect upon all of our lives bringing change to the way we communicate with each other, but also increasing our choices to acquire knowledge and to purchase goods and services. E-Commerce was far from most of our imaginations ten years ago. Today it is not only a reality, but it is transforming the way business is being done.

As I reflect upon my own business, I realize that it has not been exempt from the impact of accelerated change. Over 80% of what we're doing today, we were not doing just 10 short years ago.

As choices multiply, whether it is the remote switch for our TV or the point and click on the mouse for our computer, we're becoming accustomed to

quick response as part of the norm and entertainment as part of learning. Our attention span on any one subject is shortening.

As the pace of change and choice increases, more and more people seem to be asking the question: What's it all about? What does it all add up to? Is there purpose and meaning in my work beyond making money? Is there purpose and meaning in life?

(Give story of telephone answering machine).

Who are we, and what do we want? Some very basic questions of life. Where do we go for answers to these questions?

Hunter, a sociologist from the University of Virginia, has suggested that we live in a time of cultural wars where the most fundamental ideas about who we are, and how we are to order our lives individually and together, are at odds. His conclusion is that the nub of the disagreement can be traced to a matter of ultimate moral authority. How do we determine whether something is good or bad, right or wrong, acceptable or unacceptable? He concludes that the division or gap in our society is growing. People living and working in the same community are, in fact, worlds apart.

So as we are faced with more change and more choice, how do we make the right choices? The onslaught of technology and computerization means we have more information and data at our disposal than any other generation – more potential for good and yes, potential for evil. The advancement of technology continues to push and stretch our capability to make life and death choices. Is it possible that science has now provided the choice of duplicating life? What is to

govern or limit the freedom to choose? For some choice or the right to choose has become their god. But again, how do we make the right choice.

As people are searching for answers, some have recognized that there is a spiritual dimension to the life. Recently the Wall Street Journal had a feature article describing how business people were searching for God again. The author noted that a growing number of people in the workplace were seeking deeper meaning in life, but he also noted that most of them turn first to psychotherapy because they are embarrassed to talk about church or religion.

The author concluded that although the needs may be more spiritual than psychological, people feel like they don't have a convenient or comfortable place to discuss them. It would be just too nerdy or strange to talk about spiritual issues or needs in the work environment, and the traditional places of worship just don't understand the culture and issues of the marketplace.

Do God and profit mix? Should the business firm in the 21st century serve merely as an efficient unit of production of quality goods and services providing a consumer with what they want at a profit, or can it also be a more moral community to help shape human character and behavior? A community that is focused on the worth of a person as well as the production of goods and services; a community with a soul; a community where it is OK to talk about the spiritual issues of life.

I am a person of faith, and I am a Christian, a follower of Jesus Christ. My faith by its very nature is a defined faith. Definition brings clarity and allows for order, a systematic way of thinking and learning. Definition, however, also sets

boundary lines, determines limits of what is and what is not. It can be exclusive by shutting out those who do not believe the same way I do or fit my definition.

How then do I relate my faith to a diverse and pluralistic marketplace - one that is constantly changing? As a leader in business and one who is part of the leadership of a public company that now employs and manages over 250,000 people, how do I integrate my faith with my work? Where do I go for the answers as I seek to bridge this gulf?

Do I redefine my faith to be more inclusive and tolerant and acceptable, water it down so as not to be offensive?

Or, do I maintain the old separation between sacred and secular, live a bifurcated life and accept the premise that religion and business just don't mix, and keep my faith a very private matter?

Or, do I use my leadership to promote, propagate or impose my faith?

Or, do I seek to live and share my faith in such a way that it can be examined and tested by my colleagues and fellow workers, and yes, even embraced by some all within the context of a community that works together to produce goods and services and generate profits.

I have chosen the latter. As a leader of a business, as a leader of a public company, it is my responsibility to see that we provide quality services to our customers at a profit margin that will generate value for our shareholders. These are the transactions that make a business work. If I don't want to play by these rules, I don't belong in the ballgame. I am also, however, a person of faith, and

my faith is not something I can leave in the pew on Sunday. It is part of who I am at work on Monday. It also involves a transaction – a transaction not with a customer or a shareholder – but with God.

Now, most of us here today are business people. We understand the job of making money. The transactions of buying, selling and serving customers.

Now all of these business transactions have some very common characteristics. They involve both an offer and an acceptance. They require trust and commitment to be implemented. They start with a decision and end with a result.

While these principles govern our business dealings, they are also present in what I refer to as the basic transaction of Christian faith, and it involves both God's offer and our response.

The best way for me to describe the offer is to refer to the story told in the 3rd chapter of the Gospel of John. A man came to visit Jesus. He was a businessperson. In fact, he was described as being wealthy. His basic question of Jesus was: "How do I find God? How do I receive eternal life? How do I know the truth?"

Jesus responded by saying that the young man had to be born again – not a physical rebirth but a spiritual rebirth. The sin in his life had separated him from God, and this breached relationship could not be restored unless the sin was forgiven. God, through his Son, Jesus Christ, was making an offer of forgiveness to this young man and to all who would believe. But the offer to be effective had to be accepted. It required trust or faith and commitment, and it could not be a

completed transaction unless there was positive response and a decision by this young man to be a follower of Jesus Christ.

That same offer is open to everyone in this room today. I made it a completed transaction in my life over 45 years ago as a young boy by my mother's knee, seeking to learn from her what must be done to have a right relationship with God. Though young and unsophisticated, I was able to make a choice to take that first step of faith to turn to God and accept His offer. It was my spiritual rebirth, the beginning of my understanding and knowing God.

It was a choice that provided a hope, not only for this life, but also for an eternal life with God. It was a choice which has affected the way I live and my relationships with others; my wife, my family, my colleagues in business and my friends.

It is God's standard and His way that I love and cherish my wife; I am not the superior, she is not the subordinate. It is not my checkbook, my house, my way; we have become a partnership that is based upon mutual love and trust. A partnership that has now lasted over 40 years. Judy and I are committed to each other and must continue to work at the joining together of our separate and distinct personalities. This requires a constant attention to the smoothing of the rough edges.

The single most important product of this partnership is the children God has given us. Our role has been to provide a home for their development, spiritual nurture and admonition. Though each child is different and our role has changed with their maturity, we have a continuing responsibility for their development and for the acceptance and love of their choice of a life partner and now for the

expanded love for our 12 grandchildren. They are all God's children as well as our children.

Yes, for me there have been times of doubt and despair, especially through those difficult teenager years and the sudden death of my father when I was 18. There followed the challenges of college and law school and seeking to establish a home, support a family, and finance an education. There were also those feelings of inadequacy and concerns about whether I would measure up.

There was a drive for success which allowed my law profession to become a jealous mistress in my life; only to be stopped by God's intervention with a serious health condition. This was followed by a dramatic change in my life and meant leaving the practice of law and coming to serve as an Administrator and faculty member at Wheaton College. It was during this phase of my life that God began to teach lessons of balance and spiritual maturity.

In 1977 my path took another turn when I left Wheaton and joined ServiceMaster. Over the years, there have been many changes and choices as we have grown our business. We are more than 40 times larger than we were when I joined the company, doubling in size every 3/3-1/2 years for over 20 years. We now employ or manage over 250,000 people and our services stretch from Karachi, Pakistan to Tokyo, Japan. We are a public company and yes, I live in one of those pressure cooker environments where revenue and profits must be reported quarter-by-quarter. The shareholders to whom I am responsible vote every day on my leadership. They have a choice to buy, hold, or sell.

But the measure of my success as leader, as one who has put his faith and trust in Jesus Christ, cannot be simply measured in the value of our shares or the

profit we produce. The answer must come from the people I work with and serve. You see, on a day-to-day basis I have the opportunity to either live and implement my faith as a beacon of light for the Lord I love, or to hide my light under a bushel.

Our company objectives are simply stated to honor God in all we do; to help people develop, to pursue excellence and to grow profitably.

The first two objectives are end goals, the second two are means goals. It does not mean that everything will be done right, we experience our share of mistakes but because of a stated standard and a reason for the standard, we cannot hide our mistakes. They are flushed out into the open for correction and in some cases for forgiveness; nor can it be used as a simplistic reason for our financial success.

It cannot be applied like some mathematical formula. In a diverse and pluralistic society, some may question whether our first objective belongs as part of a public company's purpose statement, but few can argue with where it leads us and that is to the dignity and worth and potential of every person. For those of us who profess faith in Christ, it provides a wonderful opportunity to walk the talk, to live our faith.

So you see, my life has not been a simple, logical, or predictable sequence of events. God has chosen many different people and circumstances to break and mold and develop me. The most exciting thing about the process is that it is continuing. There are not answers to every question but as this transaction of life is implemented, I am learning about what it means to have a growing relationship to God; to understand how to spend my life for Him in the lives of others. To

realize His ownership of who I am and what I have. And my responsibility to be a steward of all that He has given to me.

This transaction with God has been the most important transaction of my life. Who am I, what do I want; I seek to be a follower of Jesus Christ and I hope that others will be followers as well. The wonder of it all is that God's offer is not limited to any one person or any one group. Jesus said it is available to all; however it will not be mandated or forced. We have a choice to accept it or reject it. To complete the deal requires a saying of yes to God. What will your answer be?

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