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6-11-1999

Soul of the Firm: Business as a Christian Calling

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Recommended Citation

Pollard, C. William, "Soul of the Firm: Business as a Christian Calling" (1999). *C. William Pollard Papers*. 160.
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**CALVIN COLLEGE
BUSINESS '99
AN OUTSTANDING CHRISTIAN CALLING
GRAND RAPIDS, MI
JUNE 11, 1999
“SOUL OF THE FIRM
BUSINESS AS A CHRISTIAN CALLING”**

**C. WILLIAM POLLARD, CHAIRMAN
THE SERVICEMASTER COMPANY
DOWNERS GROVE, ILLINOIS**

As I begin my talk this afternoon I want to commend the co-sponsors of this conference, Calvin College, and the Partners for Christian Development, for selecting a theme that causes us to examine our business as a calling – an outstanding Christian calling.

While the idea that one's work can be a calling is not new, especially for those from the reformed tradition, for much of this century, large segments of our world and some of our own society have been caught up with a philosophy that has been counter to and a reaction against this idea

At the beginning of this century, Weber published his classic *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. He concluded that the protestant reformation was one of the driving forces for the growth of capitalism. He also observed, however, that as we opened the twentieth century, the growing bureaucracy of large business organizations had assumed control over the worker.

The worker had become part of the machine of mass production trapped in what he described as the iron cage without hope of relating the specifics of a work task to the process of human development, or glorifying God. The worker, he concluded, no longer had a choice to be Called. Work was now just a matter of economic survival.

Weber was reflecting the theories that had already been espoused by Marx that profit or surplus generated from the labor of people was an evil, an exploitation of the laboring class by the owners of capital.

The answer for many, as we moved through the twentieth century, was that the state should become the savior of the worker. The state should become the ultimate owner of all means of production, all business, and therefore, it could provide a just and fair allocation of the surplus.

But the secular state ultimately became a corrupt, inefficient and bankrupt owner. Communism and Socialism became instruments of impoverishment.

The answer for the future, suggests Max Stackhouse, a professor of Christian Ethics from Princeton Theological Seminary, must come from what he calls a reformed capitalism. One that reflects an agenda of involvement by the Christian businessperson as a steward who is responding to his or her holy calling.

He suggests that working in the marketplace to serve the needs of people can be a holy vocation and that businesses need all the spiritual and moral guidance they can get. Therefore, he says we should encourage people of faith, those who are followers of Jesus Christ, to respond to this outstanding Christian calling, a calling to work and lead in business.

He concludes by saying, "In the emerging world of global economic interdependence, management can and should be professionalized. Christians should come to regard it as an honorable and specialized ministry of the laity. There is no longer any reason to deny the holiness of a vocation of business management."

But the purpose of this conference, the reason why we have come together, is not just to proclaim business as a calling. I assume that this truth is already accepted by most of us here today.

No, I believe we are also here today to seek a better understanding of how we can implement this truth. How we can embrace business as an outstanding Christian calling? The question for us, then, is not so much in the thought but in the act, not just in what we know but what we do. How do we integrate our faith with our work?

Can one really bridge the gulf between God and profit? Can one make money, create wealth, and serve God? If my work in the marketplace is, in fact, a calling, a full time Christian ministry, where do I begin?

Doing what I'm paid to do with excellence? Yes. But also, I suggest, our calling involves more. It involves the people we work with and serve, people who make up the market, people who represent a diversity of belief, culture and ethnicity. The type of people that Jesus touched.

People searching for meaning in their work and in their life. People groping for a moral compass.

Hunter, the sociologist from the University of Virginia, describes our society as being in a cultural war, where the fundamental ideas of who we are and how we are to order our lives are at odds. His conclusion is that the nub of the disagreement can be traced to a matter of ultimate moral authority. How does one determine whether something is good or bad, right or wrong, acceptable or nonacceptable? He suggests that people living and working in the same community are, in fact, worlds apart.

Yet all of these different people are also part of God's mix and each of them has been created in His image and likeness. They have the potential to be innovative, creative, and produce good or evil.

Recently the Wall Street Journal had a feature article describing how business people were searching for God again – returning to their churches or places of worship. 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 college courses or psychotherapy because they are embarrassed to talk about church or religion.

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

Can the business firm of the 21st century serve not only as an efficient and profitable unit of production for quality goods and services, but also as a moral community to help shape human character and behavior? A community that is focused on the worth of the person as well as the production of goods and services? A community with a soul? A community where it is okay to talk about God and the spiritual issues of life?

Although the theory of the business firm suggests that maximizing profits is the primary purpose of the firm, is this altogether right? Is profit an end goal or a means goal? Are the demands upon the firm to produce profits or results consistent with the development of the person? Are people a resource or just a cost of doing business? Can people be the subject of work or are they just the object of work?

And where does my faith fit in response to these questions?

I am a person of faith, a Christian, a follower of Jesus Christ. My faith, by its very nature, is a defined faith. Definition brings clarity. It 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. What is truth, what is error? It can result in one becoming exclusive in their thinking, shutting out those who do not believe the same way or fit the same definition.

If business is a calling – an outstanding Christian calling, how do I relate my faith to a diverse and pluralistic marketplace? As a leader in business and one who is part of the leadership of a public company, how do I integrate my faith with my work? Where do I go for the answers, as I seek to Bridge the Gulf?

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

Do I maintain the old separation between the sacred and the secular, live a bifurcated life and accept the premise that religion, business and politics just don't mix?

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

Or

Do I seek to live and share my faith in a way that cares for my fellow employees and can be examined and tested by them and yes, even embraced by some, all within the

context of a business community that works together to produce goods and services and generate profits?

Now as I ask these fundamental questions about the purpose of life and work, I do so not as a philosopher, educator, political or religious leader, but simply as a businessperson. Someone who is seeking to lead, with my partner Carlos Cantu, a fast growing, dynamic service company that we call ServiceMaster, and someone who is seeking to live and share my faith in a way that cares for those I work with.

We have experienced rapid growth, doubling in size every 3 - 3½ years for over 25 years, with system-wide revenues this year in excess of 7 billion dollars, serving over 10 million customers, and employing and managing over 240,000 people.

We are a public company with our shares listed and traded on the New York Stock Exchange. And yes, I live in one of those pressure cooker environments where earnings and profits must be reported quarter by quarter and where earnings and profits have been up every quarter for the past 28 years. The shareholders that Carlos and I are responsible to as leaders vote every day on our leadership. They have the choice to buy, hold or sell.

But what I am suggesting here today is that the measure of my success as a business leader with a Christian calling cannot be measured solely by the calculation of a total return on the value of our shares or the profit we produce. The answer must come from the people I work with.

Now much of our business may be classified as routine and mundane. We do such things as clean toilets and floors, maintain boilers and air handler 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 have the opportunity to become all that God wants them to be. 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 mission.

When you visit the headquarters of our firm, located west of the city of Chicago, you will walk into a large two-story lobby. On your right on a curving marble wall, 90 feet long and 18 feet high, carved in stone letters 8 feet high, are four statements that constitute our company 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 our building, you would notice that nearly all of the workspaces are moveable. Most of the walls do not reach the ceiling. Practically everything in the building is changeable and adaptable just like the marketplaces we serve with their 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, regardless of faith, choice or label, has been created in the image of God with dignity and worth. They become the basis for our single-minded focus on people as individuals not just part of a protected group or classification.

We do not use our first objective as a basis of exclusion. It is in fact the reason for our promotion of diversity as we recognize that different people are all part of God's mix. And 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, forgiveness.

Nor is it a standard that should be used as a simplistic reason for our financial success. It cannot be applied like some mathematical formula. It does, however, provide a foundation and a reference point for action. It becomes a living set of principles that allows us to confront life's difficulties and failures with the assurance that the starting point never changes. It causes us to think and re-think about who we are – why we work and what is the purpose and meaning of it all.

Few people find fault with our commitment to a set of principles. Quite frankly, it is the "God language" that raises eyebrows. "Aren't you walking on shaky ground when you try to mix God and profits?" ask the critics. "And what about employees who don't choose to believe the way you do? Aren't you forcing your beliefs on them?"

At one recent shareholders meeting, one of our stockholders, while commending us for our profit performance, made the following statement: "While I firmly support the right of an individual to his religious convictions and 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 the 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 profit is not a sin. I urge that next year's business report be confined to just that – business." How would you answer this

shareholder? What is just business? How can you define business without people? How can you define people without God?

The work environment need not be emasculated to a neutrality of no belief. A belief that God exists and is at work is not just some relic of the past. Or, as Steven Carter notes in his book, *The Culture of Disbelief*, “Like building model airplanes - just another hobby; something quiet, something private, something trivial and not really a fit activity for intelligent, public-spirited adults.”

As a businessperson, I want to excel at generating profits and creating value for shareholders. If I don't want to play by these rules, I don't belong in the ball game. But I also believe that the business firm I work in has another purpose. It can be a community to help shape human character and behavior. It should be an open environment where the questions of who God is and who we are and how we relate our faith to our work are issues for discussion, debate and yes, even learning and understanding. **The people of our firm are in fact the soul of the firm.**

Fortune Magazine has described the soulless company as suffering from an enemy within and cites a quote from Henry Ford as being descriptive of many business leaders when he said: “Why is it that I always get a whole person when all I really wanted was a pair of hands?”

How many times as business leaders have we been guilty of looking at people in our firms or organizations as just a pair of hands or simply another producer, an economic animal who can be motivated by a compensation package or new incentive plan or stock option program?

Drucker's classic definition of management is getting the right things done through others. But what I am suggesting here today is that a leader of faith cannot stop there. He or she must also be concerned about what is happening to the person in the process. Those people who are producing profits, who are accomplishing the mission of the organization, are also human. They have cares and concerns, emotions and feelings, beliefs and convictions. They can love or they can hate. As the soul of the firm, they can contribute or detract, motivate or discourage. Those who are involved in business as a calling must be involved in what I refer to as soul craft.

One of the current best sellers on business leadership is entitled *Leadership Engine* written by Noel Tichy, a professor at the University of Michigan's Graduate School of Business. In his book he describes companies that build and develop leaders at every level of the organization. One of the companies he studied and reported on was ServiceMaster. At first he was concerned about whether we would be a valid example because of our objectives and he makes these comments about what he found.

“For many people who don't know the folks at ServiceMaster, the stated value of ‘To honor God in all we do’ is troubling. Before we went to visit them, one of my colleagues suggested that their religious orientation might make them unsuitable as models for more ‘normal’ organizations. But the truth is that when you get to know the people who work at ServiceMaster, you quickly see that there are no traces of ethereal other-worldliness about them. They are serious business people firmly focused on winning. ‘Profit [to them] is a means in God's world to be used and invested, not an end to be worshipped. [It] is a standard for determining the effectiveness of [their] combined efforts’.”

He goes on to say: “ServiceMaster has achieved such adherence to its values. . . because everyone from [the top] down works at making them an everyday reality. One of

[their] twenty-one leadership principles says (No. 6), 'If you don't live it, you don't believe it.' And they really mean it. Service permeates all the way to the highest level of the company. And no matter how senior they become, each spends at least one day a year performing front-line service work."

Tichy is confirming in his own way what we in this room may already know – one of the best ways for a Christian to live his or her faith is in service to others.

Will the leader please stand up? Not the president, but the role model. Not the highest paid person in the firm, but the risk-taker. Not the person with the most perks, but the servant. Not the person who promotes himself, but the promoter of others. Not the administrator, but the initiator. Not the taker, but the giver. Not the talker, but the listener. People want effective leadership, leadership they can trust, leadership that will serve - leadership that will nurture their soul.

It was Socrates who stated that a person should first understand oneself as a means of making contributions to others. "Know thyself" was his advice. Aristotle counseled his followers that to use one's talents to the utmost, one must have discretion and direction. His advice was to "control thyself." But another great thinker changed history and the hearts of people with His unique approach to a meaningful life. "Give thyself" were the words spoken by Jesus. As an example to all, He took a towel and a basin of water and washed the feet of His disciples. In so doing He taught that no leader is greater than the people he or she leads, and that even the humblest of tasks is worthy for a leader to do.

Does this example fit in today's world, 2000 years later? There is certainly no scarcity of feet to wash, and towels are always available. It is in seeking to be a servant as I lead that I am able to live and share my faith in a way that it can be tested, examined and understood by my colleagues. The only limitation, if there is one, is self-imposed,

namely, my ability to be on my hands and knees, to compromise my pride, to be involved, and to have a consistent compassion for those I lead and work with.

Let me share with you some very practical and real life examples of just how this has worked in my life.

When I first joined ServiceMaster over twenty 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 are 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 some one to do something I was not first willing to do.

As a servant leader, I sometimes need to be reminded not to judge people or their potential by appearance. It is often the practice for business firms to hand out service pins in recognition of years of service. Max DePree, a friend and the former chairman of Herman Miller, recalls being 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 tie tack, said thanks, and with a wide grin proudly put the service pin in his ear lobe, not on his lapel.

This experience of Max's has been a great reminder to me that the people I seek to serve are different. The firm at work is a place where diversity should be promoted. It is a leader's responsibility to set the tone; to learn to accept the differences of people and seek to provide an environment where different people can contribute as part of the whole, strengthen the group, and achieve unity in diversity.

Loving, nurturing and caring for people are also part of a Christian's calling.

Several years ago I was traveling in what was then the Soviet Union. I had been asked to give several talks 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 task. I engaged her in conversation through the help of an interpreter and noted the tools she had to do her work. 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 another. The reality of Olga's task 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 result.

I knew from our brief conversation that there was a great unlocked potential in Olga. I am sure you could have eaten off the floor in 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 the 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, Kamala, as the 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 job. She then showed me all that she had accomplished in cleaning patients' rooms, providing a detailed before-and-after ServiceMaster description. She was proud of her work. She had bought into the result because someone had cared enough to show her the way and recognize her when the task was done. She was looking forward to the next accomplishment. She was thankful.

What was the difference between these two people? Yes, one was born in Moscow and the other in New Delhi, and their race, 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 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 the work environment. In one case, the mission of the firm involved the development of the person, recognizing their dignity and worth. In the other case, the objective was to provide activity and call it work. Olga was the object of work. Kamala had become the subject of work.

Can the business firm be a moral community for shaping human character and behavior and also excel at making money? This continues to be the grand experiment of ServiceMaster. By no means have we arrived. It is a daily challenge and there will continue to be skeptics and critics.

In effect what we are saying is that God does have a relevance to a work environment where not everyone has the same religious faith. We are saying that He does have a relevance to a work environment where people are earning money and making profit. We are also saying that He does have a relevance to a work environment where performance and results are the accepted standard of accountability. It is an experiment that will never be over.

We have found that as people align their own values with the values of the firm, a creative potential is unleashed that carries beyond the normal activities of the business firm.

For us, it has meant several creative programs involving support of community needs. Some of these programs involve partnerships with local service agencies, the

purpose of which is to provide training and back-to-work opportunities for welfare recipients, homeless, recovering drug addicts and former prisoners.

Our employees have also initiated programs involving mentoring of students in inner city schools. They have also participated in the formation of a charitable foundation and with their gifts of cash and stock of ServiceMaster, they have supported projects providing fresh water to Quichua Indian Villages in the High Andes of South America, providing computer training for schools in rural areas in Mississippi and Georgia, supporting free enterprise initiatives in Pakistan and Eastern Europe, developing a distance learning program for Christian colleges in Kenya, Romania and Lithuania, providing air transportation to the jungles of Ecuador, supporting educational and farming initiatives among the Rowani Indians in the Amazon River Base, supporting and being involved in the distribution of medical supplies to needy areas of the world, including the current crisis in the Balkans.

While some of these projects are not unique in themselves, the methods we have used in this charitable foundation may be somewhat unique. You see, the primary resources for the funding of the foundation have come from gifts made by our employees who have received the benefits of wealth creation as a result of their stock ownership and are now “giving back” through this vehicle as part of their stewardship responsibility.

As we fulfill this calling of ours to business, it does involve **a responsibility to give back**. As I close my remarks today, I do so with a message from one of those people who, as part of the ServiceMaster family, has embraced his work as a calling and who has assumed the responsibility to “give back.”

Show video.

I close with these lines from T. S. Eliot's *Choruses from a Rock*.

“What life have you if you not have life together?
There is not 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.”

* * * * *

Revised June 10, 1999