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Business as a Calling of God (China)

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Pollard, C. William, "Business as a Calling of God (China)" (2010). *C. William Pollard Papers*. 171.
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China Trip
KongFok Church
August 30, 2010

“Business as a Calling of God”
C. William Pollard

We are all aware that during the last two years, the economies of many countries, including my own, have experienced a collapse in financial markets, foreclosures and unemployment at record levels, and an unprecedented involvement of government in an attempt to correct the situation. While the economy of China continues to grow, the reality is that we all live in a global economy with a growing interdependence among all of the major players. Therefore, the causes for the collapse are of interest to all of us.

So, what were the causes for this collapse? Was it the self-interest of profit seekers, compounded by forces of unrestrained greed? Does it reflect a lack of a moral compass and duty of care in the underwriting, packaging, and selling of innovative securities? Or are we to conclude that the up and down cycles of a market-driven economy are just inevitable?

President Obama, in reviewing what has occurred, suggested that “we in the United States have arrived at this point as a result of an era of profound irresponsibility that engulfed both private business firms and public institutions, including some of our largest corporations and the seats of power in Washington D.C.”

So, where does more responsible leadership come from? Will more legislation and regulation solve the problem? As we conduct business in a pluralistic society, can we agree on a

source of moral authority? Can a business firm make money, create wealth, and also become a moral community for the development of human character and social concern? For those of us who are Christians and serving in the marketplace, can our faith make a difference? Can our work doing business be considered a ministry and calling of God?

I believe that as we try to answer these questions, we should first recognize the reality that it is people who make markets work, people who can be right or wrong, good or evil, honest or dishonest, prudent or selfish. People who, in Peter Drucker's words, are imperfect, weak, sinners, and yet made in God's image and responsible for their actions.

In dynamic and changing markets, the ethical and moral judgments required of business leaders cannot be determined solely by a set of rules – nor can a socially or commercially desired result always be achieved by the interjection of more funds or controls from government.

While legislative actions may bring a higher standard of accountability and provide a “stick” of more penalties for violations, they cannot assure the honesty, character, or integrity of the people involved.

So, how can these virtues become a more integral part of the way we do business?

I suggest that we need a transformation in how business firms are led and also how future business leaders are taught. Those of us in the market who are followers of Jesus Christ should provide an example for others to follow.

A responsible business leader should be concerned not just about what people do and how they do it, but also about the deeper questions of why people do their work and who they are becoming in the process.

As Drucker has often noted, it is important for a leader to recognize that management is a liberal art and requires an understanding of the human condition and a recognition that our humanity cannot be defined solely by its physical or rational nature, but also has a spiritual dimension. It is this spiritual side of our humanity that influences our character, our ability to determine right and wrong, to recognize good and evil, and to make moral judgments. It is the driver for developing a philosophy of life and a world view that can provide a moral and ethical standard that is not relative and functions even when there are no prescribed rules.

Management as a liberal art is all about people. It's about treating people as the subject of work not just the object of work. It's about crafting a culture of character and recognizing that the firm has a duty of care not only to the customers it serves but also to societies within which it operates.

To be effective in so doing, Drucker concluded that leaders of the firm must be able to draw upon the knowledge and insights of the humanities and social sciences, including psychology, philosophy, economics, history, and ethics. But he went on to say that leaders of the firm also must have an appreciation of the role of faith or spiritual values in seeking to understand what makes up the human condition.

On questions of faith and the nature of our humanity, Drucker was profoundly influenced by the writings of Kierkegaard. For Drucker, faith brought meaning and purpose to life. In Drucker's essay entitled "The Unfashionable Kierkegaard", he quoted Kierkegaard as saying:

"Human existence is possible as existence not in despair, as existence not in tragedy, but is possible as existence in faith. Faith is the belief that in God the impossible is possible, that in Him, time and eternity are one, that both life and death are meaningful. Faith is the knowledge that man is a creature – not autonomous, not the master, not the end, not the center – and yet responsible and free."

Thus, the learning and understanding of what it means to lead and manage people should not be divorced from questions of faith or the question of God. For some in the secular world, this conclusion may be difficult to accept, but others are ready to recognize its validity.

In his book, *The Fourth Great Awakening*, Robert Fogel, an economist from the University of Chicago and a Nobel Prize winner, traced the history of religious faith in America and its effect on our society and economy. In so doing, Fogel concluded that a major issue in our culture today was simply a lack of a distribution of what he referred to as "spiritual assets". There was, he said, a void in our society in the development of the character of people and a provision for their spiritual needs. He also went on to say that in order for the business firm of the future to resolve the growing complexities of ethical issues, it will have to acquire more "spiritual capital".

One of your own prominent economists, Dr. Zhao Xiao, also has raised the questions of spirituality and God in considering what constitutes a well-ordered and functioning market system. Zhao is a Christian and is currently serving as a Professor of Economics at a leading University in Beijing. He has concluded that the essence of a market economy requires the honoring of covenants. He believes that the Judeo Christian values can contribute to the success of an economy and should be embraced by China.

For us at ServiceMaster, we decided to be overt about the issue and we raised the question of God in our mission statement.

Our corporate objectives 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 didn't use that first objective as a basis for 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 world.

As a business firm, we wanted to excel at generating profits and creating value for our shareholders. If we didn't want to play by these rules, we didn't belong in the ballgame. But also, we 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 his or her faith with their work, were issues of discussion, debate,

and yes, even learning and understanding. We considered the people of our firm as, in fact, the soul of the firm.

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.

The process of seeking understanding and application of these objectives at all levels of the organization was a never-ending task. It involved matters of the heart as well as the head and it was not susceptible to standard management techniques of implementation or measurement. While at times it was discouraging, it also was energizing as one realized the continuing potential for creativity, innovation, and growth as there was a focus on the development of the whole person.

When I assumed leadership of the firm in the early 1980s, I had the privilege of building on the rich legacy of my predecessors – starting with our founder, Marion Wade, then Ken Hansen, and then my immediate predecessor, Ken Wessner.

Each in their own way saw business and their work in the firm as a ministry and calling of God. Marion Wade used to put it this way – “I can’t leave God in the pew on Sunday – I have to bring Him with me to work on Monday. It is my ministry.” Wade said this over 50 years ago.

Is this the generally accepted view today? When was the last time you heard a sermon on business as a ministry or the market place as a calling of God? Is this subject foreign to the way we do church?

Listen to this letter I received from a graduate of another Christian college. It reflects what may be some common understandings or misunderstandings of how God works and calls us to a purposeful life.

The student starts out by saying:

“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 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 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 a Christian community to live among ordinary, working Americans. I am expecting a considerable amount of uncertainty and loneliness, but I hope to develop some friends at the local church I will be attending.”

So, what is this student saying? Could it be that his view is representative of a common understanding of “Calling” within our evangelical culture?

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 we somehow miss out if we don't do something that fits into this category? Should we think of God's call in the context of a location or special place of service? Is it only about what we should do and the place where we should do it or is it more about who we are and who we are becoming? And where does ordinary work with those ordinary people fit in -- the ordinary people that God so loves and for whom Jesus died?

Now as a follower of Jesus Christ, one of the best ways that I found to respond to God's call to the market place and to lead in the development of the firm as a moral community was to

seek to serve as I led. To reflect the principles that Jesus was teaching His disciples as He washed their feet, including that no leader was greater or had a self-interest more important than those being led. In seeking to so serve, the truth of what I said could be measured by what I did. My faith and the ethic of my life became a reality as I was able to serve those I led. It was the salt and light of what I believed.

Reflect for a moment on that scene Thursday night as Jesus took a towel and basin of water and started to wash His disciples' feet. It was to be a special time of communion for Jesus to be alone with His disciples. Later that evening, He would be betrayed, arrested, and the next day crucified.

For the message of the Gospel to go forth – for His Church to be established, His disciples would no longer be spending significant amounts of time learning from the physical presence of His teaching. They would need to become leaders and assume responsibility to spread the good news of the Gospel across the then-known world and to establish His Church in many different locations and cultures. The time would come when they would no longer be called disciples but, instead, apostles. They would be assuming positions of title and authority over others.

The first and most important thing for them to learn was that their calling started with the Caller, not the call. Although in the future, He would not be physically present with them, their calling was to be about a continuing relationship with Him as they made choices about who they were becoming and what they should be doing. It would require their willingness to serve each other and those who would follow. There was no room for self-gratification or seeking positions

of power over others. Jesus was, in effect, telling them that their leadership role was a means and the end objective was the people who would follow and the direction they were headed.

Leadership was a position of responsibility and service, not a position of privilege. And as they served and ministered to others, there would be time for tent making, fishing, and preaching – but, above all, they were to be ambassadors of Christ in proclaiming, through their words and deeds, the good news of the gospel to a lost and needy world.

For me, the world of business has become just that: a calling and a channel for fulfilling and living my faith; 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 whom God loves and who, by my words and actions, should see the reality of His love.

Can godly and Christian values make a difference in the way a business is led or the way a leader performs his or her responsibilities? You bet they can. Creating cultures of character requires leaders to know what they believe and why they believe it; to seek truth; to know their source of moral authority and to know what is right even when there are no rules of compliance. The global market place provides a wonderful opportunity for followers of Jesus Christ to live and share their faith. There is a common language of performance in the market that crosses secular, cultural, and religious barriers. When there is performance people listen. And yes, as some people listen they respond to the redemptive message of God's love.

It is, I believe, a high calling of God; a calling that for us at ServiceMaster grew to involve the management and employment of over 200,000 people, delivering services to over 12 million customers in the U.S. and 45 other countries.

As Joshua came to the closing days of his leadership of the nation of Israel, he challenged the people 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, whatever it is, can also be a worship to the God we love as we serve and live our faith. Our work 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.

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, business person, minister, or educator, and live our faith in a way that cannot be ignored or contained, we have the platform to proclaim and share our faith. The choice is ours.

Who will we serve this day and tomorrow?

Revised August 2, 2010