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Business as a Calling of God (Wheaton, IL)

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“Business as a Calling”

College Church

150th Celebration

At College Church we are celebrating 150 years of witness to the truth of our faith. In so doing, we recognize that the essence of this truth is the gospel of our salvation. (Eph. 1:13)

It represents the power and grace of God in providing redemption for everyone who believes. (Romans 1:16)

It is the “people” of this world with all of their differences and diversity that God so loves and why He offered up his only son so that whosoever believes should not perish but have ever lasting life. (John 3:16)

As followers of Jesus Christ, we are called to be His ambassadors to promote and proclaim this gospel. We are to lift up our eyes and see those fields that are ripe and ready for harvest.

Is the world of business- the marketplace of serving customers and making money one of those “mission” fields ready for harvest. Can the doing of business with all of what that entails be considered a ministry- yes, even a calling of God.

Can one really bridge this gulf between God and profit; and not be engulfed by the trap of Serving Two Masters?

Is the idea of the market place as a mission field a subject that is foreign to the culture of our faith – can we mix the secular with the sacred?

Listen to this letter I received from a graduate of a Christian college – not, by the way, the one located across the street. 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 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 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 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 the person we are becoming in our relationship with God? And by the way, where does ordinary work with those ordinary people fit in--- the ordinary people that God so loves and for whom Jesus died?

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

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 early 1980s, I had the privilege of building on the rich legacy of my predecessors, Marion Wade, Ken Hansen, and Ken Wessner.

Each in their own way saw business and their work in the firm as a ministry and calling of God- As they would often say- "We can't leave God in the pew on Sunday- He is with us when we come to work on Monday. It is our ministry."

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 people of the firm and to engage them in truth of my faith 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. My faith, my ability to engage as I shared it

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 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 only a means and the end objective was the people who would follow and the direction they were headed.

Their leadership was to be 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.

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 first joined the ServiceMaster senior management team and spent the first two months of my ServiceMaster career our cleaning floors and doing the maintenance and other work which was part of our service business. In so doing, I was beginning to understand what would my dependence be upon and responsibility to the people I would lead.

During the time I was CEO of the firm, the faces of our service workers would often 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. When all the numbers and figures were added up and reported as the results of the firm, they had to do more than just follow the rules or satisfy the changing standards of the accounting profession. They also had to accurately reflect the reality of our combined performance – a result that was real – a result that you could depend upon; a result that would reflect the true value of the firm. Otherwise I was deceiving myself and those that I was committed to serve.

Implicit in leadership is the power to make decisions that affect others. You can be right in your intent and decision but be wrong in how you use power to implement that decision.

The mistakes I have made as a leader that hurt the most are those that have resulted in breached relationships with others. In seeking to achieve specific performance goals, I have at times pressed too hard for results without understanding the subjective factors of fear, insecurity, or risk of failure that were influencing substandard performance of the individual involved. I have learned that people put in a corner must fight or crumble and the rightness of my position can be lost in the defeat of the person. In such times, there is a need for admitting your mistakes, asking for forgiveness, and seeking reconciliation. God has used many situations and circumstances in business to mold me and provide opportunities to share His love and the truth of my faith with others. Let me share a few of them with you.

Listen to this letter from another college graduate, one of our Chinese employees who had graduated from a University in Beijing and had helped me in the development of our business in China:

When I grew up in China, religions were forbidden and Mao's book became our bible. When I was five or six years old, I could recite Mao's quotations and even use them to judge and lecture the kids in the neighborhood.

Mao said, "Serve the people. Leaders should be public servants." This coincides with some of ServiceMaster's moral standards. When I think deeply, I see the difference that makes one work so successfully and the other collapse fatally. It must be the starting point of ServiceMaster to honor God and that every individual has been created in His image with dignity and worth.

ServiceMaster is designed to be a big, tall tree with strong roots, which penetrate extensively to almost every corner of a person's daily life. It is beginning to grow in mine.

Shu Zhang is a thinking person. She has been confronted with life choices that go beyond doing a job or earning a living; choices about which she was becoming and whether she would respond to God's offer of love and forgiveness- a choice that only she could make.

Story of Joe Kuday

Story of Susan Baker

During leadership of ServiceMaster, Peter Drucker, the well known management expert became an advisor and a friend. One of the benefits of my friendship with Drucker is that he never hesitated to point out those areas where I could improve my leadership. One of those important moments of learning occurred when we were traveling together to conduct a management seminar in Tokyo for Japanese business leaders.

After the seminar, Peter and I had dinner. I shared with him my disappointment, and yes, even anger, over the fact that no one from the leadership team of our Japanese business partner had come to the seminar. They had been invited and had promised to attend. Since some of our current and prospective customers were in attendance, it would have provided an opportunity for them to learn and also to make important business connections.

I explained to Peter that we had recently decided to delay bringing one of our new service lines to Japan and that our partner was upset with that decision. I explained that this was probably the reason its leaders did not come.

I told Peter that I intended to cancel my trip to their headquarters in Osaka and take an earlier flight back to the States. Peter encouraged me to rethink my position and gave some advice, including his thoughts and understanding of Japanese culture. Although I listened to him, I made up my mind that I was not going to accept his advice and I would reschedule my flight the next morning.

When dinner was over, we returned to our respective hotel rooms. At about 10:30 that evening, I received a call from Peter asking me if I would come to his room. He was still concerned about my reactions and wanted a further discussion with me.

As Peter opened the door to his hotel room, I could tell by the look on his face that he was troubled. He told me to sit on the chair near his bed. He then sat down on the edge of his bed and looked me straight in the eye. "Bill," he said, "you are suffering from hubris. It's time for you to eat some humble pie." He went on to explain how quickly leaders can lose touch with the reality of their responsibility when they think their pride is at risk. He pointed out that my job as leader was to go to Osaka, meet with our business partners, resolve our differences, and rebuild a relationship of trust. This result was needed for the continued growth of our business in Japan and for the opportunities it would provide the people in our business. It was my job to do this as a leader, and it was something that I could not delegate.

It was great advice. The next morning I was on the train to Osaka, and my meeting there accomplished the right result for our business and for our people. I did have to eat some humble pie. The leadership lesson was clear. My leadership responsibility was not about me or my feelings. It was about what should be done for our business and our people.

(Give example of six months later – Komai funeral)

The market place provides a wonderful opportunity to share your faith and to live it as a responsible leader. 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.

For me, the world of business has become an integral part of God's calling, 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. It has provided the 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.

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? Will we be a vehicle for use by God to help people find The Truth that is not only worth the seeking but has eternal value?

* * * *

June 7, 2011