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“Business as a Calling of God”

C. William Pollard

Etched in stone on the floor of the chapel of Christ Church College at Oxford University are the words of John Locke spoken over 300 years ago:

“I know there is truth opposite falsehood and that it may be found if people will search for it, is worth the seeking”.

As Christians we have the benefit of scripture and the work of the Holy Spirit in knowing the truth of our faith. However the application of that truth, to what we do and how we live is a process of continuous seeking and learning.

So as we seek to apply the truth of our faith, is there anything in common between God and profit? Between our worship in church on Sunday and our work of serving customers and making money on Monday?

Or are these just two different worlds separated by a wall with the sacred on one side and the secular on the other? A wall that can be a force of separation in the way we “talk about and do church” and the way we “talk about and do business”.

Does the world that God so loves as described in John 3:16 include people working in the marketplace many of whom will never darken the door of a church? Is the marketplace a mission field ready for harvest? Or is it just a big sinful hole of greed where profit is maximized by a few at the expense of many and where the master is the love of money?

As we conduct business in a growing pluralistic and secular society, is there room for raising the question of God as the source of moral authority? Can a business firm make money, create wealth and also become a moral community for the development of human character? Can leadership make a difference? For those of us who are Christians and serving in the marketplace, does our faith have a relevance in the way we do business? Can the work of doing business be considered a spiritual ministry and yes even a high calling of God?

Or so 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 a

person miss out if they 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 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? Where does the teaching of the church fit in to answering these questions?

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 are imperfect, weak, sinners, and yet made in God's image with dignity and worth and their own fingerprint of potential. People who have been created with the freedom of choice but who are also morally responsible for their decisions and actions.

We also should recognize that 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 government controls.

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. We need to bring our faith to work on Monday and learn to integrate the claims of our faith with the demands of our work. To affirm our faith but not impose it. To seek to glorify God in all that we do and say. To be Ambassadors of Christ as God makes his appeal through us.

In so doing, we should be concerned not only about what people do and how they do it in their work, but also about who people are becoming in the process.

This important principle relating to the responsibility and accountability of a Christian who has management or leadership responsibilities in business became a reality for me as I was mentored by my predecessors in ServiceMaster and also through the writings, friendship, and advice of Peter Drucker.

Drucker, who is often referred to as the father of modern-day management, reminds us that the management of people is a liberal art and as such requires an understanding of the human condition. This includes the 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, that is other oriented, and that functions even when there are no prescribed rules.

Management as a liberal art is about treating people as the subject of work not just the object of work. For the leader, it's about assuming the responsibility for crafting a culture of character and recognizing that the

business firm has a duty of care not only to the customers it serves but also to societies within which it operates.

To be effective and responsible in so doing, Drucker concludes that leaders must be able to draw upon the knowledge and insights of the humanities and social sciences, including psychology, philosophy, economics, history, and ethics. But also he goes on to say that leaders must have an appreciation of the role of faith in determining the ultimate purpose and meaning for the life and work of the individual.

On questions of faith and the nature of our humanity, Drucker was profoundly influenced by the writings of Kierkegaard. In Drucker's essay entitled "The Unfashionable Kierkegaard, he comments:

"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 need not be divorced from questions of faith or the role of

God in one's life. While for some in the "secular" academy this conclusion may be difficult to accept, 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".

When I assumed leadership of ServiceMaster 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. Before the development of our Company objectives, 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.”

As the Company grew, four objectives were adopted to reflect our mission and purpose as a business firm. They were: 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 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 questions of a person’s moral and spiritual development, the existence of God, how one could have a relationship with Him, and how one could relate 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 and not just a pair of hands to get the work done.

Regardless of the task, people can find a sense of purpose and meaning in their work. They can develop a strong ethic that extends to the care for others; a sense of community and a willingness to give back and practice charity. Yes, they can develop a respect for the dignity and

worth of their fellow workers and a willingness to serve as they have an opportunity to lead.

As they do so, they honor their Creator even though they may not recognize Him as such. The community of work so developed provides fertile ground for raising the question of God and for the understanding and acceptance of His redeeming love in one's life.

Over the last 20 years there has been a growing number of Christian business people who are seeking to integrate the claims of their faith with the demands of their work. In response, there are now over 1,000 para church organizations that have been formed to support them. But wait a minute, haven't these same people been sitting in the pew on Sunday? Where is the Church in supporting this movement?

The Barna Group recently did some research on this subject. They concluded that there is a growing number of pastors who say they have recently preached about God's view of work and how one's faith should impact one's work. However, 70% of church goers still cannot see how their work can be a ministry to God or is equal in importance to a pastor or priest.

As a follower of Jesus Christ, one of the best ways 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 and provided a platform for me to share my faith.

Servant leadership has been a continuing 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 out 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 be my dependence upon and responsibility to the people I would lead.

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. 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 our customers 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.

Unfortunately, there are often many trappings around a position of leadership wherever it might be – in business – in education – in government or in the church -- the perks or prestige of the office and the arrogance of success can tempt leaders to focus on self and think they have the answers rather than focusing on their responsibility to others. It is the evil of hubris. It is often subtle and can have a cumulative effect on judgment unless it is nipped in the bud.

Let me share an example about learning a lesson in this regard that occurred later on in my leadership responsibilities at ServiceMaster and reflects the continuing need to be aware of the subtle effect of hubris and the hand of God in opening up opportunities to witness and share our faith.

One of the benefits of my friendship with Peter Drucker was 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 together. 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 the leadership of our

partner was no doubt upset with that decision. I explained that this was probably the reason they 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 with the President of our partner and her team 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. But the story doesn't end there.

Six months after this meeting, the president of our business partner in Japan suddenly died of a heart attack. Soon after I heard the news, his wife contacted me and asked me if I would come to Japan and participate in his funeral ceremony.

I was honored to do so but frankly I was somewhat perplexed about how I could do so in a way that would reflect the sincerity of our friendship

and also to share the great hope of my faith and the truth of God's redeeming love. I knew it would be a traditional Japanese funeral ceremony led by both a Buddhist monk and a Shinto priest. I wanted to speak the truth of my faith but I did not want my words to disrupt or offend.

I decided to share some of what we discussed when we had our last meeting, including the importance of forgiveness in building relationships of trust. I then closed with a word of what God's forgiveness had meant in my life and His offer of forgiveness for all who would receive it. My message was well received. And once again God, in His wisdom, used the doing of business to cross the lines of culture and faith to honor the truth of His Word.

Actions often speak louder than words. If I had not made that trip to Osaka six months earlier and eaten some humble pie, there would not have been the opportunity for me to speak and share my faith six months later.

As we invest ourselves in the lives of others, people will respond. God will provide the opportunities to share and speak the truth of our faith.

As part of expanding our business to China, I made numerous trips to China.

After one of those trips, I received a note from one of our Chinese employees who had been traveling with me as an interpreter. Here is what Shu Zhang said, "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 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 penetrates extensively to almost every corner of a person's daily life. It is still growing in mine. And I am still learning".

Shu is a thinking person. She felt accepted and respected in her work environment. She was confronted with life choices that went beyond

doing a job and earning a living; choices about who she was becoming and how she could relate to God. She was growing and developing an understanding of herself and the purpose and meaning for her life.

For me, the world of business became a channel of distribution for fulfilling and living my faith; a channel that 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 provided a wonderful opportunity for me to embrace and engage those who did not believe the way I did, but whom God loved 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 is no code of conduct. 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 10 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? 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?

* * * *

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.