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The Soul of Our Work (Article)

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Faith at Work

“The Soul Of Our Work”

C. William Pollard

A growing number of Christians are taking God out of the pew on Sunday and bringing Him to their work on Monday. It is a movement where people are seizing the opportunity to integrate the claims of their faith with the demands of their work. They are looking at their work as not only a way to make a living but also a calling of God. -- A ministry to the people they work with and the people they serve. --

As I say this, I am reminded of the words of the Apostle Paul to the Corinthians when he said:

“All this is from God who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation. ...we are Ambassadors for Christ with God making his appeal through us.”

For those of us who have spent much of our life working in the market place or in some other so called secular activity like teaching in a

public school, serving as a doctor or nurse in health care or serving in an elected or administrative role in government, we know that many of the people we work with have never realized the redemptive love of God and the joy of being reconciled to Him. They are part of the world that God so loves and every one of them have been created in the image and likeness of God with dignity and worth and their own fingerprint of potential.

Each one of them is immortal with a soul that will live beyond this life. They represent the only thing in our work that is of eternal value.

They are The Soul of Our Work.

It was C. S. Lewis who reminded us that:

There are no ordinary people
You have never talked to a mere mortal
Nations, cultures, arts, civilization –
These are mortal and their life is to ours
As the life of a gnat
But it is immortals whom we
Joke with, work with, marry,
Snub and exploit.

As Ambassadors for Christ in our work, it is important for us to be productive and to excel in what we do – to be honest and ethical – to be an example for others to follow – to learn how to affirm our faith without

imposing it -- to raise the question of God in a way that will engage others
– to serve those we lead and to always be prepared to provide the reason
for the hope that is within us.

What is the role of the Church in supporting this movement? Can we
expect more support and teaching on this subject from our churches, our
seminaries, our Christian educational institutions? Can we learn more from
those who have and are integrating the claims of their faith with the
demands of their work?

Now as I ask this last question -- for me, most of my learning came
from my predecessors at ServiceMaster. As Christians and leaders in
business they were committed to serving others as they served their
Master. Living their faith was an important prerequisite to sharing their
faith.

Our corporate objectives at ServiceMaster 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 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 we also 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 the soul of our work.

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 often it was not susceptible to standard management techniques of implementation or measurement.

We found that the community of work could become fertile ground for raising the question of God and for the understanding and acceptance of His redeeming love in one's life.

One of the best ways I found to engage the people I worked with 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.

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 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 people I would lead. Little did I realize then that this would ultimately involve over 200,000 people as we grew to serve over 10 million customers in 45 different countries.

Later on in my career, as I became 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 wrongs of running a business. The integrity of my words and actions had to pass their scrutiny. Otherwise I was deceiving myself and those that I was committed to serve.

As you invest yourself in the lives of others, people do respond. God will provide opportunities to share and speak the truth of your faith. It is His way of teaching us to love Him on the horizontal as we engage the world that He so loves. I have experienced this many times in the work environment.

After one of my trips to China, I received this note from one of our 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 for fulfilling, living, and sharing 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 on the New York Stock Exchange. The market place provided an 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, needed to see the reality of His love.

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.

The doing of business can be a high calling of God; a calling that for us at ServiceMaster touched many people as we grew to become one of the most admired companies among the Fortune 500.

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

Etched in stone on the floor of the Chapel of Christ Church College at Oxford University are the words of John Lock 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.”

Who will you serve this day and tomorrow? Will you be a vehicle
for use by God in our work place to help people find The Truth of our faith
that is not only worth the seeking but has eternal value?

The Soul of our work are the people we work with and serve.

* * * *

I conclude with a few lines from 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.