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# Speech at National Association of Convenience Stores Prayer Breakfast

C. William Pollard

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**National Association of Convenience Stores (NACS)  
Prayer Breakfast  
Chicago IL  
October 12, 2003**

**C. William Pollard**

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Dickens once said: “It is the best of times and the worst of times.” Although he wrote this years ago about the struggle between two cities, one in England and the other in France, he may well have written about the world we live in today.

As Americans, we have much to be thankful for. Our standard of living is one of the highest in the world. Even though our economy has been sluggish, there are signs of improvement and there are still great opportunities ahead of us.

During the last several years, however, we also have been reminded that our way of life is not a given. September 11 was not just another Tuesday morning. It was a defining moment. The reality of our times is that there are certain people groups in this world that hate what we stand for as Americans, and who will kill themselves and thousands of others as part of their war against us. Our engagement in Iraq and events that have unfolded in recent months have confirmed that this hatred and terrorism is still alive and well.

We also have seen, during this period, too many failed examples of leadership in business.

As one who has spent most of his life and career in the marketplace, I am very much aware of how these failures have shattered the public's confidence in corporate America.

*The Financial Times* recently reported on what they called The Barons of Bankruptcy, a privileged group of top American business leaders who made extraordinary fortunes even as their companies were heading for disaster. They examined 25 business collapses over the last two years and, according to their figures, the executives and directors of these doomed companies walked away, while their companies were heading into bankruptcy, with over \$3.3 billion in compensation and proceeds from stock sales.

How do we explain such a result? Was it an explosion of corporate greed? Was it a lack of moral leadership? Was it the result of gross negligence by a governing board? Was it incompetence by outside auditors or a broken auditing system? Did the incentive systems, including stock options or the way they are accounted for, contribute to this result? Was the penchant for quarter-by-quarter performance, based on the assumption that business growth and value could be accurately reported and measured within a three-month time horizon, also a contributing factor?

The reality is that all these forces and more converged into what we might call "The Perfect Storm" – a storm that has contributed, along with the down economic cycle, to an overall loss in market value of over \$6 trillion. People have been hurt. Savings and provisions for retirement plans have been extinguished. Jobs have been lost. One of the world's largest accounting firms whose reputation was once like sterling on silver is gone. And now we learn that the leader of the New York Stock Exchange, who was in the forefront of encouraging more rules

and regulations to correct these abuses, had in his back pocket an undisclosed retirement package that would pay him close to \$200 million.

Do these experiences involve more than just a blip in the evolution of understanding how best to manage and balance those ever-present human factors of greed, self-interest, bias, power and deceit with appropriate checks and balances of government supervision, control and, yes, more rules and regulation? Or, as we seek a solution, is there something more at work that is fundamental to understanding human behavior and that is essential to the development of moral and ethical leadership - a reformation of our thought and action – a call for a renewed focus on the development of the character and integrity of the leader – a focus on the source of moral authority – a reason for why we are here today as we stop to reflect and pray.

Several months ago, there was a series of articles in the *Chicago Tribune* on the current state of the economy in America. The headline of the feature article was: “Have We Sold Our Souls?” The author’s conclusion was that our economy was still sluggish, not because of a lack of consumers, but instead because our society was sluggish. Markets were lackluster, he said, because the people involved with them were detached from a life of genuineness, meaning, and purpose. He concluded that many corporate leaders were no longer able to define reality because they have lied to themselves, their employees and their shareholders.

Effective and responsible leadership starts with the ability of the leader to define reality and in so doing, to understand the essence of their own human nature and the human nature of the people they are leading. It is important for a business leader not only to be concerned about what people do and how they do it,

but also to ask the deeper question of why people do their work and who they are becoming in the process.

Our humanity cannot be defined by a set of rules or solely by examining its physical or rational nature. It is unique in that it also has a moral and spiritual side. It is the spiritual side of humanity that influences character – our ability to determine right and wrong - to recognize good and evil – to make moral judgments – to love or to hate – to develop a philosophy of life – a world view, if you will, that can provide a leader with a moral and ethical framework and standard that is not relative and functions even when there are no prescribed rules.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn, in his classic work, *Gulag Archipelago*, recognized the reality that a line between good and evil passes through every human heart. He suggested that even within hearts overwhelmed by evil there was one small bridgehead of good, and even in the best of hearts, there remained a small corner of evil. His conclusion was that it was impossible to expel evil from the world in its entirety, but it was possible to recognize it and constrain it. For Solzhenitsyn, that source of truth and constraint came from God, an authority beyond himself.

As we come here this morning for a time of prayer, we are doing more than just meditating or reflecting. We are raising the question of God. Is there a God Who loves us and who is not only interested in how we function in a place of worship, but is interested in how we conduct our business?

The process of prayer is all part of developing the spiritual side of our humanity.

Yes, by the way, it's okay to talk about spiritual things in the work place. In fact, Fortune Magazine recently had a feature article on the whole subject of God and business. The author concluded that bringing spirituality in the work place may violate the old idea that faith and fortune don't mix. But yet he also found that there seemed to be a groundswell of doing it. In response to the question of why one would look for God in their work, the answer he received from one of the business leaders interviewed was simply this: "Since most of us spend so much time working, it would be a shame if we couldn't find God there."

Now, as I raise this question of God, I do so not as a religious leader, simply as a business person. Someone who over the past 25 years has participated in the leadership of what was a fast-growing and dynamic service company that we called ServiceMaster.

As I have now retired from those leadership responsibilities and look back, I can add up the numbers that show a growth in profits, customers served and a return for our shareholders that on average doubled every five years. While these figures are part of a normal business assessment of performance, the answer for me cannot be limited to these money or value creation measurements. The real and lasting measurement is whether the results of my leadership can be told in the changed and improved lives of the people I have led.

As a business firm, we wanted to excel at generating profits and creating value for our shareholders. I felt that if we didn't want to play by these rules, we didn't belong in the ballgame. But I also tried to encourage an environment where the work place could be a community to help shape human character - 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. I considered the people of our firm as, in fact, the soul of the firm.

My experience confirmed Peter Drucker's conclusions: that people work for a cause not just a living and that mission and purpose were important organizing and sustaining principles for the firm. 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 the 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 mix.

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.

Now, for me as a Christian, a follower of Jesus Christ, it also meant that as I shared my faith, I had the opportunity to **live** my faith, not in a way that would impose it upon my colleagues and fellow workers, but instead would allow the example of my life and leadership to be examined, tested, understood and, in some cases, embraced by them as they sought not only to do things right, but also to do the right things.

As I come here this morning to pray, I believe that I am praying to a personal God –a God Who loves and cares for me and for this world and has provided a hope that can sustain me through the difficulties and uncertainties of life. For me, that hope is found in the offer and promise of Jesus Christ that all who will turn from their own way and follow Him will be accepted and secure in God’s love.

This offer of God to be involved in our lives is available to all, but like any offer it cannot be a completed transaction in the life of an individual unless there is a corresponding choice of acceptance and trust by that individual. When that choice is made, I believe there is hope not only for this life but also for an eternal life.

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, civilizations – these are mortal and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals who we joke with, work with, marry, snub and exploit.”

In a pluralistic society and a world where there is freedom to choose, not everyone will agree with my starting point or the need for a personal faith and trust in God. But, for me, this is where I get my direction and my anchor as I have experienced the wind and storms of a life of running and growing a business, loving and supporting a wife for over 40 years and caring for four children and now thirteen grandchildren.

One of the best ways I found to lead our business firm as a community that would serve customers, make money, and nurture the character and moral development of people was to seek to serve as I led; to reflect the principle that Jesus taught His disciples as He washed their feet – 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 ethic became a reality as I served.

In so doing, God has chosen many different people and circumstances to break, mold and develop me and the most exciting thing about the process is that it is continuing. My prayer this morning, however, is that each of you will experience the reality of God in life and business and you keep focused on doing things right and doing the right thing.

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Revised 1/22/04