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Bridging the Gulf Between Faith and Work (Charlottesville, VA)

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**Darden Christian Fellowship
University of Virginia
April 18, 2001**

“Bridging the Gulf Between Faith and Work”

**C. William Pollard, Chairman
The ServiceMaster Company
Downers Grove, Illinois**

Thank you for the opportunity to share with you today. I have looked forward to this time of being with you. My good friend, Steve Reinemund, had told me of your fellowship and over the years I also have admired what has been accomplished by the Center for Christian Study.

As I share some thoughts with you today about life and work, I will stimulate some questions and we will have a time for questions and dialogue at the conclusion of my talk.

Now, most of us here today are either in business or are preparing for a career in business. We have or will spend much of our time at work and make money in the process. Yet many of us are also people of faith. We are Christians. We believe in God and the redeeming work of His Son, Jesus Christ.

We have learned to live within these two separate worlds - one labeled secular and the other sacred.

In fact, in the early part of my career, this distinction and division between the two worlds was so strong, I was a bifurcated person. My church and family and friends were one part of my life and my business and profession were a

completely separate part of my life. It was a divided world with little common ground. My faith, although nourished and protected, wasn't really making a difference in the area of my life that was demanding most of my waking hours.

In my penchant to define and protect my faith, I was, in reality, circling the wagons around it, encouraging a mentality of withdrawal instead of involvement, of taking and not giving, knowing the truth but not relating into all areas of my life.

So then, how does a person of faith integrate that faith in a diverse and pluralistic marketplace? As a Christian, my faith, by its very nature, is a defined faith. Definition brings clarity. It allows for order – a systematic way of thinking and learning. Definition, however, also sets boundary lines, determines limits of what is and what is not, what is truth and what is error. It can result in shutting out those who do not fit that definition.

What do I do?

1. Do I try to redefine my faith to make it more inclusive, tolerant, acceptable? Water it down so as to be not so offensive?
2. Do I become more aggressive in proclaiming my faith as defined and use my leadership or influence to propagate and impose my faith?
3. Do I simply forget it, accept the prevailing view of the separation between the sacred and the secular and the premise that religion and business just don't mix?

4. Or can I live and share my faith in such a way that it can be examined, tested by my colleagues and fellow workers and, yes, even embraced by some – all within the context of a community that works together to produce goods and services and generate profits and also cares for the development of people not only in what they are doing but also in who they are becoming?

I have chosen the latter. It has been a growing and developing experience for me. There were lessons that needed to be learned and I am still in the process of learning.

Those lessons have stretched over three separate careers – 8 years as a practicing attorney, 5 years as a college professor, and the past 24 years as a leader at ServiceMaster.

It has been a business career that I have learned the most about what it means to integrate faith and work.

ServiceMaster is a company that has experienced rapid growth during the last 24 years, doubling in size every 3 to 3½ years, with system-wide revenues in excess of 7.5 billion dollars, serving over 12 million customers, employing and managing over 250,000 people with our major business here in the U.S., and also with locations now in 40 foreign countries.

But what I am suggesting here today is that my success as a business leader who is seeking to integrate his faith with his work cannot be measured solely by

the calculation of a total return on the value of our shares or the profit we produce. The answer also must come from the people I work with.

Now much of our business may be classified as routine and mundane. We do such things as clean toilets and floors, maintain boilers and air handler units, serve food, kill bugs, care for lawns and landscapes, clean carpets, provide maid service, and repair home appliances. The task before us is to train and motivate people to serve, so they will do a more effective job, be more productive in their work, and yes, even have the opportunity to become all that God wants them to be. For us this is both a management and a leadership challenge. It is more than a job or a means to earn a living. It is in fact a way of life or mission.

When you visit the headquarters of our firm, located west of the city of Chicago, you will walk into a large two-story lobby. On your right on a curving marble wall, 90 feet long and 18 feet high, carved in stone letters 8 feet high, are four statements that constitute our company objectives – To honor God in all we do, To help people develop, To pursue excellence and To grow profitably.

If you were to tour the rest of our building, you would notice that nearly all of the workspaces are moveable. Most of the walls do not reach the ceiling. Practically everything in the building is changeable and adaptable just like the marketplaces we serve with their changing demands and opportunities.

But the marble wall conveys a permanency that does not change. The principles carved in this stone are lasting. The first two objectives are end goals. The second two are means goals. As we seek to implement these objectives in the operation of our business, they provide for us a reference point for seeking to do that which is right and avoiding that which is wrong.

They remind us that every person, regardless of faith, race or gender, has been created in the image of God with dignity and worth. They become the basis for our single-minded focus on people as individuals not just part of a protected group or classification.

We do not use our first objective as a basis of exclusion. It is in fact the reason for our promotion of diversity as we recognize that different people are all part of God's mix. And it does not mean that everything will be done right. We experience our share of mistakes. But because of a stated standard and reason for that standard, we cannot hide our mistakes. They are flushed out in the open for correction and, in some cases, forgiveness.

Few people find fault with our commitment to a set of principles. Quite frankly, it is the "God language" that raises eyebrows. "Aren't you walking on shaky ground when you try to mix God and profits?" ask the critics. "And what about employees who don't choose to believe the way you do? Aren't you forcing your beliefs on them?"

At a shareholders meeting, one of our stockholders, while commending us for our profit performance, made the following statement: "While I firmly support the right of an individual to his religious convictions and pursuits, I totally fail to appreciate the concept that ServiceMaster is in fact a vehicle for the work of God; the multiple references to this effect, in my opinion, do not belong in the annual business report. To interpret a service for profit, which is what ServiceMaster does, as a work of God is an incredible presumption. Furthermore, to make profit is not a sin. I urge that next year's business report be confined to just that – business." How would you answer this shareholder? What is just business? How

can you define business without people? How can you define people without God? For me, the link between God and profit is people.

As a businessperson, I want to excel at generating profits and creating value for shareholders. If I don't want to play by these rules, I don't belong in the ball game. But I also believe that the business firm I work in has another purpose. It can be a community to help shape human character and behavior. It should be an open environment where the questions of who God is and who we are and how we relate our faith to our work are issues for discussion, debate and yes, even learning and understanding. **The people of our firm are in fact the soul of the firm.**

Fortune Magazine has described the soulless company as suffering from an enemy within and cites a quote from Henry Ford as being descriptive of many business leaders when he said: "Why is it that I always get a whole person when all I really wanted was a pair of hands?"

How many times as business leaders have we been guilty of looking at people in our firms or organizations as just a pair of hands or simply another producer, an economic animal who can be motivated by a compensation package or new incentive plan or stock option program?

Drucker's classic definition of management is getting the right things done through others. But what I am suggesting here today is that a leader of faith cannot stop there. He or she must also be concerned about what is happening to the person in the process. Those people who are producing profits, who are accomplishing the mission of the organization, are also human. They have cares and concerns, emotions and feelings, beliefs and convictions. They can love or they can hate. As the soul of the firm, they can contribute or detract, motivate or

discourage. Those who are involved in business as a calling must be involved in what I refer to as soul craft.

One of the current best sellers on business leadership is entitled *Leadership Engine* written by Noel Tichy, a professor at the University of Michigan's Graduate School of Business. In his book he describes companies that build and develop leaders at every level of the organization. One of the companies he studied and reported on was ServiceMaster. At first he was concerned about whether we would be a valid example because of our objectives and he makes these comments about what he found.

“For many people who don't know the folks at ServiceMaster, the stated value of ‘To honor God in all we do’ is troubling. Before we went to visit them, one of my colleagues suggested that their religious orientation might make them unsuitable as models for more ‘normal’ organizations. But the truth is that when you get to know the people who work at ServiceMaster, you quickly see that there are no traces of ethereal other-worldliness about them. They are serious business people firmly focused on winning. ‘Profit [to them] is a means in God's world to be used and invested, not an end to be worshipped. [It] is a standard for determining the effectiveness of [their] combined efforts’.”

He goes on to say: “ServiceMaster has achieved such adherence to its values. . . because everyone from [the top] down works at making them an everyday reality. One of [their] twenty-one leadership principles says (No. 6), ‘If you don't live it, you don't believe it.’ And they really mean it. Service permeates all the way to the highest level of the company. And no matter how senior they become, each spends at least one day a year performing front-line service work.”

Tichy is confirming in his own way what many in this room may already know – one of the best ways for a Christian to integrate their faith with their work is to live it and to do so in service to others.

It was Socrates who stated that a person should first understand oneself as a means of making contributions to others. "Know thyself" was his advice. Aristotle counseled his followers that to use one's talents to the utmost, one must have discretion and direction. His advice was to "control thyself." But another great thinker changed history and the hearts of people with His unique approach to a meaningful life. "Give thyself" were the words spoken by Jesus. As an example to all, He took a towel and a basin of water and washed the feet of His disciples. In so doing He taught that no leader is greater than the people he or she leads, and that even the humblest of tasks is worthy for a leader to do.

Does this example fit in today's world, 2000 years later? There is certainly no scarcity of feet to wash, and towels are always available. It is in seeking to be a servant as I lead that I am able to live and share my faith in a way that it can be tested, examined and understood by my colleagues. The only limitation, if there is one, is self-imposed, namely, my ability to be on my hands and knees, to compromise my pride, to be involved, and to have a consistent compassion for those I lead and work with.

Let me share with you some very practical and real life examples of just how this has worked in my life.

When I first joined ServiceMaster over twenty years ago, my predecessors, Ken Hansen who was then Chairman of the company, and Ken Wessner, who was President and CEO of the company, were both involved in recruiting me to join the

firm. They wanted me to come and head up the legal and financial affairs of the company, reporting directly to Ken Wessner.

In the selling of the job, they suggested that I, along with others, would be considered in the future for the CEO position of the company.

The interviewing process took several months and as we were coming to what I thought was the final interview to confirm compensation and starting date, I decided that I needed to know more about what it would take to be CEO of ServiceMaster. As I pressed the point and tried to get some assurance of how I could become CEO, Ken Hansen stood up and said the interview was over. Ken Wessner led me to the front door. As I left ServiceMaster, I concluded that it was over – I had blown the opportunity.

A few days later, Ken Hansen called me on the phone and asked me if I wanted to have breakfast with him to discuss what had happened in the interview. I accepted the offer and at breakfast he made clear to me his teachable point of view. He simply said: Bill, if you want to come to ServiceMaster to contribute and serve, you will have a great future. But if your coming is dependent upon a title, position or ultimately the CEO position, then you will be disappointed. It is up to you.

The point was simple. Never give a job or a title to a person who can't live without it. Leaders in ServiceMaster, to be successful, must have or develop a true servant's heart. I took the job and Ken, in his own way, tested me at the front end. I spent the first six weeks in ServiceMaster out cleaning floors and doing maintenance work, which are all part of our service business. There were lessons for me to learn, the most important of which was – as a leader I needed to be a

servant, and that I should never ask some one to do something I was not willing to do myself.

As I seek to be a servant leader, I also need to be reminded not to judge people or their potential by appearance. It is often the practice for business firms to hand out service pins in recognition of years of service. Max DePree, a friend and the former chairman of Herman Miller, recalls being involved in such an event. He was surprised by the response of one of the recipients. The young man opened the box, took out the beautiful sterling silver tie tack, said thanks, and with a wide grin proudly put the service pin in his ear lobe, not on his lapel.

This experience of Max's has been a great reminder to me that the people I seek to serve are different. The firm at work is a place where diversity should be promoted. It is a leader's responsibility to set the tone; to learn to accept the differences of people and seek to provide an environment where different people can contribute as part of the whole, strengthen the group, and achieve unity in diversity.

God has room for diversity.

Shu Zhang was raised and educated in China, indoctrinated in communism, and has worked with us to help develop our business for this market. Listen to this letter I received from her:

Dear Bill:

I felt so much need to talk to you since I came back from management seminar.

When I grew up in China, religions were forbidden and the communists taught us religion was superstition. 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 standard. When I think deeply, I see the difference which makes one work so successfully and the other collapses 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.

Ten years ago in China, people were not allowed to think and speak freely. Those who held different opinions and views with the government were treated as the enemy, and enemies were not treated as human beings any more. When people found out Mao was just another Chinese emperor, we lost our believing. This is a generation who had been brainwashed since we were born. When I went to Beijing last March with you and Ralph, I met with my high school classmates. They talked a lot about the consumer oriented Chinese young people. We have heard a lot of excitement about the big

change in the Chinese economy which brought tremendous opportunities, but this also worried us about a generation without beliefs and moral standards.

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 still growing, and I am still searching."

I hope and pray that as part of Shu's searching, she will find the Lord I love. But for her to be attracted, she had to be first included and accepted. She is part of the world that God so loved.

God has called us to be in the world but not part of it. He has provided us the example of His Son, Jesus Christ, who became like us, dwelt among us and is the model of the expected scope and intensity of our involvement. He has called us to be excellent in what we do whether we call it the task, job, profession or ministry.

And when we excel in what we do, whatever that may be, as a lawyer, teacher, minister or business person, we live our faith in a way that cannot be ignored or contained. However, when we proclaim our faith and do not live it we sow seeds of cynicism and rejection.

So for me, business is not just a game of manipulation that accomplishes a series of tasks for a profit, with the gain going to a few, the atrophy of the soul of

the person producing the results. People are not just economic animals or non-personal production units - nor can they be simply lumped as Evangelicals, Protestants, Catholics, Baptists or Presbyterians. Every person is created in the image of God, with their own fingerprint of personality and potential. As a leader in business, it is my responsibility to provide an environment that unlocks that potential and as a Christian to walk and talk about my faith in a way that invites others to seek and embrace the same Savior I love.

It was C. S. Lewis who reminded us “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 we joke with, work with, marry, snub and exploit.” Who are we and what do we want? I hope that each of you will take seriously the task of integrating your faith with your work. I conclude my remarks this morning with some lines with 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."

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