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Business Ethics - Do God and Profit Mix?

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**2002 National Conference for Pastors, Christian Educators and Laity
Urban Outreach Foundation
Oak Brook, Illinois
September 27, 2002**

“Business Ethics – Do God and Profit Mix?”

C. William Pollard

I appreciate this opportunity to participate and share with you at your National Conference for Leadership Development.

Thank you for crossing a boundary and inviting me to speak to you about the subject of ethics and business.

In light of the stories that have appeared over the last 12 months in the pages of our newspapers and have captured the headlines on TV all relating to issues of greed, corruption, self-dealing and cover-ups of business leaders, I realize that some of you may be wondering what I am doing here as a leader in business talking about ethics.

As a group, you have done so much for the growth of the church in the African community and I also realize that some of you may wonder whether I understand the ethical issues you face in your business or in your churches.

Now, for those of you who may have some of these questions, please bear with me. Listen with an open ear as I share some thoughts as a fellow believer, a follower of Jesus Christ, one who has been working at the process of seeking to integrate my faith with my work for the past 40 years, and one who views the marketplace as a calling – a special place in this world that is all part of the command to take the Gospel to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth. People in the market are in need of the message of Jesus Christ. A message that reflects not only what we say but also what we do.

Yes, an ethic or a way of life that embraces making money and serving Jesus. An ethic that requires of the leader to be an example of right behavior. A servant to those he or she leads and a champion for diversity, seeking to treat every person in the workplace with dignity and worth - all as part of being a special creation of God.

Do God and profit mix? Doesn't the Bible tell us that the love of money is the root of all evil and that we can't serve both God and Mammon? And what does it profit a man if he gain the whole world yet lose his own soul? But we also know that the Bible reminds us that the plans of a diligent man lead to profit and Jesus exhorted us to invest our talents for profitable returns.

How then, do we take this faith of ours and mix it with business – with serving customers, creating wealth, doing what is right? The recent examples of how **NOT** to do it are all around us. The age-old evils of greed and deceit did abound in the examples of Enron, Worldcom, Adelphi, Tyco and others. People have been hurt. Savings and provisions for retirement plans have been extinguished. Jobs have been lost. And yes, some people will go to jail. And yes, some of the leaders involved not only were professing Christians, but led Bible studies and taught in Sunday Schools. How do we reconcile such a result? The only response I have to that question is something that I have observed time and time again – people, yes, even Christians, live bifurcated lives. There is little or no integration between their faith and their work – between what they hear on Sunday and what they do between Monday and Friday.

This is an imperfect world we live in. Sin is with us. We all experience it. None of us are above being tempted by money or wealth or an ability to benefit self at the expense of others. But that is not what Jesus taught nor is it the way He wants us to live or to lead. There are timeless values – Biblical values – that can help us navigate through the tensions and cross currents of life. Our leadership can make a

difference -- our leadership in business, our leadership in the home, our leadership in the church. The truths of our faith touch all areas of our life. When we merge the knowing of our faith with the doing of our life, we are about the process of becoming -- yes, becoming more like Christ.

It is possible to find meaning and purpose in our work.

Our humanity is not only physical and rational; it is also moral and spiritual. It is the spiritual side of our humanity that influences our character -- our ability to determine right or wrong -- to recognize 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 stability and point of reference -- an ethic -- that does not change.

A laborer, a mechanic, a janitor, an IT specialist, an accountant, an executive cannot be understood solely in economic terms -- what they are paid or in what they earn -- or in satisfying their physical needs. Nor can they be measured simply by their intellectual or educational accomplishments. An MBA doesn't make a person good. There is a spiritual and moral dimension of life that needs to be nurtured and developed. A spiritual dimension that influences behavior and is a factor in guiding and directing the forces of good and evil, love or hate, determining right and wrong.

So, does our work or the world of the marketplace have anything to do with our moral or spiritual development?

The majority of the people in our churches today -- in fact, the majority of the people in the world -- will spend most of their waking hours in the work environment. Why shouldn't the development of human character and moral behavior also be an integral part of this environment? We mix the skills and talents of people at work. Work also has become an environment where we are attempting to accomplish certain

social goals as we seek to correct some of the imbalances in the mix and opportunity of culture, race, gender. If all of this is happening at work today, can't we also be about the process of developing human character and behavior at work -- having work become a community focused on the worth of the person as well as the production of goods and services? A community with a soul? A community where it is all right to talk about God and spiritual issues in life? And what is the role of the church in supporting Christians who are seeking to integrate the truths and claims of their faith with the reality of their work? Does the pastor understand the issues facing the business person? Are we all talking the same language? Do we understand each other?

The writer of Ecclesiastes asks the question this way: "What does a man get for all the toil and anxious driving with which he labors under the sun? All his days are work, pain and grief." Is this how we should view work as Christians? Is work a curse or is it a gift from God? Is it a calling or is it addictive?

John Wesley concluded that there was an inherent tension between productive work and religion. Religion, he said, encouraged productivity and frugality, which in turn produced riches and wealth. But he then observed that as wealth grew, the essence of what religion should be in the hearts and minds of people and in a relationship with God and others was typically diminished. His answer to all of this was simple – the injunction: Gain all you can, save all you can and give all you can. I am reminded of the advice that the founder of our Company used to give us. He used to tell us that money is like manure. The bigger the pile, the more it smells.

In his classic *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber concluded that the Protestant Reformation was one of the driving forces for the growth of capitalism. He observed, however, that by the beginning of the 20th century, the growing bureaucracy of large business organizations had assumed control over the

worker. The worker was part of a machine of production – trapped in what Weber described as the iron cage – without hope of relating the specifics of the work task to the process of human development or even to glorifying God. The worker no longer had a choice to be called, he said. Work had become just a matter of survival.

So now, almost a hundred years after Weber’s conclusions about the effect of the industrial revolution upon the worker, and after the failure of the grand experiment of Marx and Lenin and their followers, and in light of the reality that our free market system is alive and functioning in most parts of the world, how are we to view the role of a business organization no matter what its size and its leadership in developing the whole person, including the moral and spiritual side of the person?

How do we help people find a sense of purpose and meaning in their work? Develop a strong ethic that extends to the care of their family? Set a standard for right and wrong – a sense of community – a willingness to give back – to practice charity – a willingness to engage in diversity – a capacity to resist the lure of hedonism – a sense of discipline and commitment to truth – a respect for the dignity and worth of every person and a love for their fellow workers and their neighbor – a willingness to serve as they lead - a willingness to confront the question of the existence of God and their relationship to Jesus Christ. Yes, these are some of the timeless values that must continue to be taught and developed in our society. Values that are based upon our faith as followers of Jesus Christ. Values that must fill the spiritual vacuum that is in the market place today.

Robert Fogel, an economic professor from the University of Chicago and a 1993 Nobel Prize winner, has written a book entitled *The Fourth Great Awakening*. Although he would describe himself as a secular Jew and his area of expertise is economics and business, not religion, he decided to trace the history of religious faith in America from pre-Revolutionary War times to the present and analyzed the effect of

religion and moral values upon issues in our society, in our businesses and in our economy. He concluded that the biggest issue today in the United States is not a lack of employment opportunities or even a distribution of economic resources or economic opportunity. It is, in his opinion, the lack of what he refers to as a distribution of spiritual resources and spiritual assets. There is, he concludes, a void in our society in the development of the character and the spiritual dimension of people.

During the last eighteen months, there has been a series of articles on the issue of spirituality in the work place. Fortune Magazine had a feature article on 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 seems to be a groundswell of interest 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 he interviewed was: "Since most of us spend so much time working, wouldn't it be a shame if we couldn't find God there?"

Recently, USA Today had a cover story on the subject of God and technology. The author interviewed 9 CEOs of high tech companies and concluded that all of them had spent a lot of their time thinking about the big question of God and most of them had a strong belief in God. Newsweek also had an article about how our minds had been wired for spirituality and The Wall Street Journal had a story about people searching for answers to God not in their church or their synagogue, but in their work. A recent book entitled *Church on Sunday, Work on Monday* by Laura Nash of the Harvard Business School concludes that the spirituality in business movement is changing not only the face of business, but also the face of religion. The author goes on to say that there is an absence of support of church engagement in this spiritual effort, with resulting confusion and frustration, especially for Christian business people.

Now I am a person of faith – a Christian – a follower of Jesus Christ. 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 can set boundary lines - determine limits of what is and is not. It can be exclusive by shutting out those who do not believe the same way I do or fit my definition. How then do I relate this faith to a diverse and pluralistic market place. As a leader in business, and one who is part of the leadership of a public company that employs and manages over 50,000 people, how do I integrate my faith with my work? Where do I go for the answers as I seek to bridge the gulf between God and profit?

Do I redefine my faith to be more inclusive and tolerant and acceptable? Water it down so as not to be offensive?

Do I maintain the old separation between sacred and secular? Continue to live a bifurcated life and accept the premise that business and religion and politics just don't mix?

Do I use my leadership to promote and propagate or impose my faith?

Or do I seek to live and share my faith in such a way that it can be examined and tested by my colleagues and fellow workers and, yes, even be embraced by some – all within the context of a community that works together to produce goods and services, generate profits and develop human character.

It is this latter alternative that I have chosen to follow as I have been involved in the leadership of a fast-growing, dynamic company that we call ServiceMaster. Today we serve over 12 million customers with one or more of our services and are located in 45 different foreign countries around the world. We are public company with our shares listed and traded on the New York Stock Exchange and, yes, I have lived in one of those pressure cooker environments where earnings and profits must be reported

quarter by quarter. The shareholders that I was responsible to as leader voted every day on my leadership. They had a choice to buy, hold or sell.

Our business objectives are simply stated: To honor God in all we do, to help people develop, to pursue excellence and to grow profitably.

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, choice, race or gender, has been created in the image of God with dignity and worth. These become the basis for our single-minded focus on people as individuals, each with their own fingerprint of personality.

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.

Nor is it a standard that should be used as a simplistic reason for our financial success. It cannot be applied like some mathematical formula. It does, however, provide a foundation and a reference point for action. It becomes a living set of principles that allows us to confront life's difficulties and failures with the assurance that the starting point never changes. It causes us to think and re-think about who we are – why we work and what is the purpose and meaning of it all.

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 one recent 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? What is there in common between God and profit?

The link, I believe, is people, all of whom are part of the world God so loved. As a business firm, we are not a church, nor are we a Christian company. We have people and leaders who are Christians, but we also have people and leaders who are Muslim, Jewish or of no professed faith.

We live and work in a diverse and pluralistic world. At the same time, we believe the work environment need not be emasculated to a neutrality of no belief. A belief that God exists and is at work is not just some relic of the past. Or, as Steven Carter notes in his book, *The Culture of Disbelief*, “Like building model airplanes - just another hobby; something quiet, something private, something trivial and not really a fit activity for intelligent, public-spirited adults.”

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 - 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?

So for me as a Christian, a follower of Jesus Christ and also a leader in business, I must live and share my faith in such a way that it is not imposed upon my colleagues and fellow workers but instead can be examined, tested, understood and, in some cases, embraced by them as they seek not only to do things right but also to do the right thing.

One of the best ways that I have found to do this is to seek to serve as I have led and to reflect the principle that Jesus taught His disciples as He washed their feet – no leader is greater than the people he or she leads and that even the humblest of tasks is worthy of a leader to do. Servant leadership has been a learning experience for me. It has not come naturally.

To do so, I **first** had to understand what it meant to walk in the shoes of those I would lead. This was a lesson that I would learn as part of joining the team at ServiceMaster over 25 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 is all part of our service business. (Insert story of hospital experience.) 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 someone to do something I was not first willing to do myself.

Second, a servant leader must believe and trust in the people he or she leads and should always be ready to be surprised by their potential. A colleague of mine tells of an experience that has been a great reminder to me of this point. It is often the custom of firms to hand out service pins in recognition of years of service. As my friend was 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 service pin that was to be used as a tie tack and said thanks, and with a wide grin proudly put the service pin in his earlobe not on his lapel.

People are different, and we should never be too quick to judge potential by appearance or lifestyle. The firm at work is a place where diversity should be promoted. It is the leader's responsibility to set the tone, to learn to accept the differences of people, and to seek to provide an environment where different people contribute as part of the whole and so to strengthen the group, and achieve unity in diversity.

Third, servant leaders should make themselves available. Their door should always be open. They should be out and about talking and listening to people at all levels of the organization. At our headquarters building in Downers Grove, we have designed our executive offices as a reminder of this principle of listening, learning and serving. Nobody works behind closed doors; glass is everywhere, confirming our

desire to have an open office and open mind. No executive office captures an outside window. The view to the outside is available to all working in the office.

Fourth, the servant leader must be committed, must assume a covenant of care and growth opportunities for those they lead - not a bystander or simply a holder of position. The leader is there to do what it takes – to subordinate self-interest for the benefit of the whole. No enterprise can function to its capacity nor can its people expect a healthy organizational culture unless they can rely upon the covenants and commitments of their leaders. This goes beyond the covenants usually contained in an employment agreement or in a legal document. It extends to the people who day-by-day are relying upon the leader for their future. It is fulfilling a leader’s campaign promises. It is the leader’s obligation or, as some have described it, “their posture of indebtedness”.

Fifth, servant leaders have a love and care for the people they lead. They must treat people as the subject of work – not just the object of work.

Several years ago, I was traveling in what was then the Soviet Union. I had been asked to give several lectures at major universities on the service business and our company objectives. While I was in the city then called Leningrad, now renamed St. Petersburg, I met Olga. She had the job of mopping the lobby floor in a large hotel, which at that time was occupied mostly by people from the West. I took an interest in her and her tasks. With the help of an interpreter, I engaged her in conversation and noted the tools she had to work with.

Olga had been given a t-frame for a mop, a filthy rag and a bucket of dirty water to do her job. She really wasn’t cleaning the floor; she was just moving dirt from one section to the other. The reality of Olga’s job was to do the least amount of motions in the greatest amount of time until the day was over. Olga was not proud of

what she was doing. She had no dignity in her work. She was a long way from owning the results.

I knew from our brief conversation that there was a great unlocked potential in Olga. I'm sure you could have eaten off the floor of her two-room apartment. But work was something different. No one had taken the time to teach or equip Olga. No one had taken the time to care about her as a person. She was lost in a system that did not care. Work was just a job that had to be done.

I contrast the time spent with Olga with an experience I had just a few days later while visiting a hospital we serve in London. As I was introduced to one of the housekeepers, Kamula, as Chairman of ServiceMaster, she put her arms around me, gave me a big hug and thanked me for the training and tools she had received to do her work. She then showed me all that she had accomplished in cleaning patient rooms, providing a detailed before and after description. She was proud of her work. She owned the result. Why? Because someone had cared enough to show her the way and recognize her for her accomplishments. She had dignity in her work. She was looking forward to her next accomplishment. She was thankful.

What was the difference between these two people? Yes, one was born in Moscow, the other New Dehli, and their race and language and nationalities were different, but their basic tasks were the same. They both had to work for a living. They both had modest and limited financial resources. One was very proud of what she was doing. Her work had affected her view of herself and others. The other was not, and she had a limited view of her potential and worth.

The difference, I suggest, has something to do with how they were treated, loved and cared for in their work environment. In one case, the mission of the organization involved the development of the person. In the other case the objective

was to provide activity and call it work. In one case, the person was the subject of work; in the other case, she was the just the object of work.

So will the business leader who is seeking to live their faith please stand up? Not the president or the person with the most distinguished title or the longest tenure, but the role model. Not the highest paid person in the group, but the risk taker. Not the person with the largest car or the biggest home, but the servant. Not the person who promotes himself or herself, but the promoter of others. Not the administrator, but the initiator. Not the taker, but the giver. Not the talker, but the listener.

Leadership is both an art and a science. The results of a servant leader will be measured beyond the workplace. The story will be told in the changed lives of people. As we seek to lead and develop a business firm as not only a producer of profit but also as a moral community, for the development of human character, we should recognize that it will not always be comfortable. At times it feels like you are in a rowboat rowing up stream and other times like you're in the middle of an ocean all by yourself. There will be an audience of skeptics with questions raised regarding the appropriateness of mixing one's faith with one's work environment. There will be some failures and mistakes; some people who talk about their faith and don't live it.

During the difficult or uncertain times, remember that the Author of our Faith is still on the Throne. The people we work with can love or hate, produce or destroy; do good or evil. As they work and produce, they are in the process of becoming somebody. They are whole people, not just a pair of hands or the cost of doing business. As we get involved in helping to develop their character and their spirit, we are doing God's work.

Yes, there are timeless values that are channel markers for navigating, leading and contributing during these turbulent times. Leadership can make a difference.

Leadership that knows who they are and what they believe. Leadership that is prepared to serve.

It was C. S. Lewis who said: “There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations - they 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.” What is business without people? What is a world without God? Listen to these 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.

Will more examples of servant leadership make a difference in our society?
Listen to these words from James Smith, who was one of our service managers and
who, four years ago, was walking the streets of Chicago as a homeless person.

Here show the James Smith video

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