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The Business of God at Work

C. William Pollard

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**Christian Business Faculty Association
Cedarville, OH**

**October 27, 2006
C. William Pollard**

“The Business of God at Work”

I am delighted to be with you today and share some thoughts about the subject of The Business of God at Work.

As I begin, I want to thank each of you for your commitment to the teaching of subjects related to Business and Economics in Christian Institutions of Higher Education.

Many years ago, as a student, I benefited from the teaching of those with a like commitment. It was in my accounting, management, economics, and business law classes that I first began to realize that the vocation of business could be a calling from God, that management was truly a liberal art, and that profit was not the result of sin, but was part of God’s economy of surplus and our responsibility of stewardship.

These seeds of understanding came not from textbooks but instead from the lives and examples of professors, as they earnestly sought to integrate their faith with the learning process. I had the opportunity a few years later to follow in some of their footsteps as I served in the administration and as a faculty member at Wheaton and I too felt the joy of planting some of these seeds of understanding.

I trust that my remarks today will be an encouragement to each of you to continue to develop a better understanding of God's role in the marketplace, so your students will be even better prepared to integrate the claims of their faith with the demands of their work.

While 30 years ago it was generally considered that business and religion don't mix, there is now an open dialog in the marketplace about issues of faith and the role of God in business. Numerous books and articles have been written on the subject including feature articles in Fortune, Newsweek, and the Wall Street Journal. Maybe some of you saw the recent article in the Wall Street Journal that appeared in the October 9, 2006 issue and described executives in Florida who were seeking to run their businesses by the "Good Book", using biblical principles to guide them in managing people, serving customers, and earning a profit.

In a soon to be published book by Oxford University Press entitled "God at Work", David Miller, the Executive Director of the Center for Faith and Culture at Yale University, discusses this increased interest in spirituality in the workplace. He concludes that there are a growing number of business people attending conferences and management seminars on the role of spirituality at work, participating in Bible studies at work, and also reading books, magazines, and newsletters for self-help training on how to relate biblical teaching with marketplace demands.

He notes that, for the most part, the church has been silent and non-responsive to this growing interest and desire among Christian business people to

close the Sunday/Monday gap. His study further indicates that to help fill this void of silence, there has been a rapidly growing number of supporting para church organizations. He estimates that there are now more than 1200 such organizations involved in the faith/work movement.

He also expresses disappointment with his finding that, in general, the teaching faculty at seminaries and other institutions offering biblical studies continue to have pre-suppositions about capitalism, business, and the marketplace, that range from being benign to negative. On the negative side, the views portray the business community as a necessary evil, unsupportive of social justice concerns, harmful and exploitative of people and the environment, and only interested in maximizing profits.

One of the most interesting books on this general subject is not by a Christian or a person of religious authority, but instead by an economist who is a Nobel Prize winner and a professor at the University of Chicago. In his book entitled "*The Fourth Great Awakening*", Robert Fogel traces, from pre-Revolutionary War days to modern times, the various religious awakenings in America and their impact on our society and economy. As a secular observer, he has determined that one of the greatest issues in our society and the world of business today is a lack of a consensus of moral authority and a lack of what he refers to as a distribution of spiritual assets or spiritual resources. He concludes that in order for the firm of the future to resolve the growing complexity of ethical issues, it will have to acquire spiritual capital.

What he is saying is something we already know as Christians, and that is, the health and welfare of people cannot be understood or measured only in terms of their economic or physical needs. Nor can it be measured solely by their intellectual or educational accomplishments. There also is a spiritual dimension to the human condition. It is this spiritual dimension that influences moral behavior and the development of character and is the genesis of love, not hate; good, not evil. It is this spiritual dimension of people that raises the question of God and His role in both the act of creation and the act of redemption.

The business firm need not be just a place where we make money and create wealth, but it can also become a moral community for the development of human character. A community where it is ok to talk about God and one's source for a moral authority.

As I have now retired from my leadership responsibilities at ServiceMaster and look back, I can add up the numbers that show growth in profits, customers served, and a return for our shareholders that on average was 20% per year. While these figures are part of a normal business assessment of performance, the conclusion 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 seen in the changed and improved lives of people I led.

As a business leader, I wanted to excel at generating profits and creating value for shareholders. If I didn't want to play by these rules, I didn't belong in the ballgame. But I 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 their faith with the demands of their work were issues of discussion, debate and, yes, even learning understanding and acceptance. I considered the people of our firm as, in fact, the soul of the firm.

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 our first objective as a basis of 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.

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 and innovation, as there was a focus on the development of the whole person.

One of the best ways that I found to share my faith and lead in the development of the spiritual as well as the economic side of the firm was to seek to serve as I led. As I did so, I was able to affirm that the interest of others came before mine and the truth of what I said and believed should be measured by what I did.

Servant leadership has been a 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 ServiceMaster, now almost 30 years ago.

As I concluded my time at Wheaton and was preparing to go back to the practice of law, I was recruited by Ken Hansen, who was then Chairman of ServiceMaster, and Ken Wessner, who was the President and CEO of the Company, to consider joining the firm. They wanted me to come and initially head up the legal and financial affairs of the Company, reporting directly to Ken Wessner.

During the recruiting process, the two Kens shared their vision for the future and inferred that someday I might have an opportunity to lead the Company. And so, as I came to that final day of decision about whether I would join the ServiceMaster team and as I sat in Ken Hansen's office waiting to sign the

final documents of employment, I needed to know more about exactly what I would have to do to be CEO of this Company.

So I started pressing the two Kens on what needed to be done and how long it would take for me to be President and CEO of this Company. After about five minutes of listening to me, Ken Hansen stood up, looked me in the eye, and said: “Bill, the interview is over.”

As I was ushered to the front door and left ServiceMaster that morning, I concluded that I’d blown my opportunity and this was God’s way of directing me back to the practice of law.

Two days later, Ken Hansen called me on the phone and asked me if I wanted to know what happened in his office that day. I said sure and we met for breakfast the next morning. Ken’s words to me that morning were simply put this way: Bill, if you want to come to ServiceMaster and contribute, you will have a great career. But if you are coming to the Company for a title or position or to promote yourself, you’d better forget it. Ken then proceeded to share with me the meaning and role of being a servant leader in a public company. There were lessons for me to learn, including:

- Never give a title or position to somebody who can’t live without it.
- Determine at the front end whether the leader’s self-interest or the interest of others will come first.
- Know whether the leader can define reality by being willing to do what they ask of others.

And as I made the decision that day to join the ServiceMaster team, Ken would test my commitment and also take time to teach me what it was like to walk in the shoes of the people I would lead. During the first eight weeks of my initial assignment as a corporate vice president, I spent my days out working with our service workers doing the service tasks we perform for our customers. In so doing, I learned the reality of my dependence upon and responsibility to the people I would lead. Little did I realize then that this would ultimately involve over 200,000 people as we grew to serve over 12 million customers in 45 different countries. This experience often reminded me of my own imperfections and the need to admit my mistakes and ask for forgiveness and seek guidance from above.

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 you 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.

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 are we as business leaders 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?

Those who want to be involved in their business as a calling from God must be involved in what I refer to as soul craft. They must learn to treat people as the subject of work, not just the object of work.

Learning how to integrate your faith with your work can sometimes come from a painful mistake or failure. Implicit in leadership is the power to make decisions that affect others. You can be right in your intent and decision but be wrong in how you use power to implement that decision.

The mistakes I have made as a leader that hurt the most are those that have resulted in breached relationships with others. In seeking to achieve specific performance goals, I have at times pressed too hard for results without understanding the subjective factors of fear, insecurity, or risk of failure that were influencing substandard performance of the individual involved.

In the process, I have at times ended up with a broken relationship. There was a need for admitting your mistakes, asking for forgiveness, and seeking reconciliation. This process is all part of learning to live your faith.

Early on in my leadership at ServiceMaster, I was to learn two other important lessons of leadership. The teacher for one was my son Chip Pollard, who is now President of John Brown University, and for the other was my friend and advisor Peter Drucker.

After college, Chip's first graduate school experience was Harvard Law School. When he came home after his first year at Harvard, he was asked to share some of his experiences at one of our church services.

Chip explained to the audience that his experience at Harvard had thrust him into an environment where there were people of many different faiths and beliefs. He concluded that if he were to engage and embrace them with the truth of his faith, he would not likely convince them through words of defining or defending his faith. Instead he needed to live and share his faith in a way that it could be examined, considered, and yes, embraced by some. His thoughtful presentation and example provided a model for me to follow as a leader in my business life. It would be wrong for me to use my leadership to impose my faith or treat people differently because they didn't believe the way I did. The example of my life had to tell the story. There would be times when I could share God's love and His way of salvation, but it needed to be done within the context of how people saw me live my faith.

The second lesson involved a discussion I had with Peter Drucker about planning for the future of our firm and setting what I thought was an agenda of priorities. After listening to me, he responded by giving me a history lesson on the

use of the word “priority” in the English language. He said that it first came into use in the 14th Century in the singular and it wasn’t until the 20th Century that it was pluralized. He then emphasized that the issue I was facing in the business was not a question of priorities, but instead of finding the priority and doing it.

That night, in my hotel room, I was reflecting on his advice and also some issues of priorities or balance in my own life including some tension I was feeling between time spent with family, time spent with the church and time spent in business. As I read once again from Matthew 25, I realized in a new way there could be only one priority in my life and that was to “seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things will be added unto you”.

First, it meant that if God wasn’t in it, there was no time for it.

Second, I could do a better job of disciplining my scheduling and time and

Third, if God was in it, it was not so much the quantity of time I spent, but instead the quality of time.

For me, this issue of balance is, and may always be, a work in process.

One thing is certain, however; there can be no room for a bifurcated life – God on Sunday; work on Monday; and time for my family whenever I could get around to it.

Business has become a channel of distribution for fulfilling and living my faith. A channel that has 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 has

provided a wonderful opportunity for me to embrace and engage those who do not believe the way I do, but who God loves and who, by my words and actions, should see the reality of His love. My family has become the joy of my life: my wife of 47 years and my children and now 15 grandchildren. Judy has been a great helpmate and my kids as adults have become best friends and, in their own way, have been good teachers and advisers.

Now, Joshua is one of those Biblical examples of a great leader. As he came to the closing days of his leadership, he called all of the tribes of Israel together and reminded them that, with God's help, they had been victorious in battles and were now occupying the Promised Land, living in cities they did not have to build and eating from vineyards they did not have to plant and then he challenged them 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 and our family can also be a worship to the God we love as we serve and live our faith. The business firm, where we serve customers and make money, and our home and family, where we nurture and are nurtured, can become a center of 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.

As I say this, I am reminded of two quotes from C. S. Lewis. One is from *The World's Last Night* when he was describing God as One who “allows the ... muscles and minds of men to cooperate in the execution of His will ... and who seems to do nothing of Himself which He can possibly delegate to His creatures” and the other is from *The Weight of Glory* when he 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.”

There is ample room and opportunity in the marketplace today for students graduating from Christian Colleges to be used by God to make a difference in the lives of people – those special people who have been created in God's image and who are in the process of becoming as they head for eternity. As we seek to prepare these students to do so, I suggest that we may need nothing less than a radical reformation of the way we think, the way we act, and the language we use. We need a renewed focus on the development and shaping of conscience and character. A better understanding of what Jesus meant when he said no man can serve two masters and a way of understanding and relating the God we worship on Sunday with the profit we make on Monday. We must not only teach our students to know what is right and to articulate truth claims, but we also must be an example of how one can share and live their faith in a way that will engage, not

condemn, those who do not believe the same way we do. We must learn how to confirm the truth of God's way and the inclusiveness of His love. We also must continue to seek ways of improving our teaching of what leadership is all about, including emphasizing the leader's posture of indebtedness to those that follow and the role of a leader as a servant to others.

The marketplace is not interested in our promotion of a religion or in our boasting of knowing the truth. It will listen if we take the time to introduce people to the person of Jesus – a person who lived and walked in their shoes and who gave His life that they might know and be accepted by a loving God.

My prayer is that these words may be supportive as you renew and continue your passion to plant the seeds of understanding among your students so that they can become effective leaders for Christ in a marketplace of both opportunity and great need. The demand side of the equation is there and appears to be growing. Will we be able to provide the supply? God has delegated to us a big task that involves those immortals whom He so loves.

* * *

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