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A Cross-Eyed View of Leadership

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A Cross-Eyed View of Leadership

Dr. Kaiser, Dr. White, members of the Board of Trustees, and members of the faculty, thank you for the opportunity of addressing these graduates. It is a special privilege to do so as my friend Walt Kaiser is concluding his leadership here at Gordon-Conwell. For me, as for many others, Walt has been a role model in both word and deed and a teacher, not only in what the Bible says, but also what it means in the everyday practical applications of life. His example of leadership has spoken louder and clearer than any words I might say on the subject. And also, it is a special day for me to be here with my colleague Dick Armstrong, who has been Chairman of your Board and who worked alongside me over the years in the leadership of ServiceMaster.

Now to you, who are graduating today, and to your families and friends, my prayer is that the words that follow will be used by the Lord to encourage and advise as you take what you have learned and go forward in responding to God's call, and in seeking to follow the ways of your Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

As graduates of Gordon-Conwell, you have been prepared to teach, to shepherd, to guide and to lead God's people and in so doing, to engage a lost and needy world. Your future role may be that of a pastor, professor, missionary, director or president of a Christian organization or for that matter, you may follow the path of one of my predecessors and mentors at ServiceMaster, Ken Hansen, who was called from the

pastorate to come and help start a business. A business with a mission. A business that was to be a ministry for many of us.

Whatever the path or series of paths you take, you will be called upon to lead and to be good and faithful stewards of the talents, knowledge and resources that God has entrusted to you. We are told by the Psalmists that God owns all that we are and have and we are reminded by Jesus in the Parable of the Talents that God expects a return on His investment in us. We are to seek the priority of a productive life with Jesus as our example.

So, as you assume a leadership role, I encourage you to do so with your eyes fixed on the Cross. It is this Cross-Eyed view of leadership that should characterize what you say and do. The people you touch and lead will then be able to see beyond you, beyond your accomplishments and knowledge, and so to witness the love of God.

As you view life and the world around you through the Cross, you will grow to understand that leadership is only a means, not an end. That it is not about you or your “leadership characteristics”, it’s about the people who follow and the direction you are leading them. It’s about an opportunity to serve, not a title or position of privilege and power. An opportunity to serve as Jesus did, with a towel and a basin of water.

There always is a level playing field at the foot of the Cross. As the Apostle Paul reminded us, there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female. The often too-human distinctions, labels, and titles, we place upon people are never a basis for preference when we serve as ambassadors of God's love. It is the world that He so loved with all of its differences and diversity.

A world that is looking for answers. Answers that you have been uniquely trained and prepared to give. Answers that only the grace and atonement of the Cross can ultimately provide. Answers that may relate to the practical aspects of life, like raising children or integrating the claims of our faith with the demands of our work. Answers and guidance that will help people to know and understand their faith, not only in terms of truth claims, but also to grasp the need to live and share those truths in a way that will engage, not alienate those who do not believe the same way they do.

Such a Cross-eyed view of leadership will encourage people to be both salt and light in the world of their families, their communities and their work.

As I try to put a practical application to this advice, let me share with you some of my experiences, imperfect as they are, of learning and seeking to apply a Cross-eyed view of leadership as I have served the Lord I love in the world of business.

I joined the corporate world 29 years ago after practicing law for ten years and then serving for five years on the faculty and in administration of Wheaton College. As I concluded my time at Wheaton and was preparing to go back to the practice of law, I was recruited to consider joining what at that time was a relatively small public company called ServiceMaster. The company was led by two Wheaton grads, Ken Hansen and Ken Wessner.

It seemed like a great opportunity. The two Kens had set a fast pace for growth with a plan of doubling in size every three to four years. They also had developed an environment and culture consistent with my faith beliefs. The company's objectives were:

- To Honor God in all we do
- To help people develop
- To pursue excellence, and
- To grow profitably

Those first two objectives were set out as end goals, the second two as means goals. It was not an exclusive environment, a place only for professing Christians. We had a mix of people and beliefs that reflected our culture and society. But it was a place where people of faith were encouraged to share and live their faith and were often reminded that "if you don't live it, you don't believe it".

During the recruiting process, the two Kens shared a vision for the future and inferred that someday I might have the opportunity to lead the company. 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 decided to press the two Kens about exactly what I would have to do to be CEO, the leader of this company. What needed to be done and how long would it take. After about five minutes of listening to me, Ken 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 had 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 had 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 simple but profound, "Bill, if you want to come to ServiceMaster and contribute, you'll have a great career, but if you are coming to the Company for a title or position or to promote yourself, you better forget it." Ken then proceeded to share with me what it meant to be a servant leader in a public company. A leader who would be able to sacrifice self for the benefit of others. There were lessons for me to learn, the first of which was never to give a title or position to someone who can't live without it.

And as I made the decision that day to join the ServiceMaster team, Ken would later test my commitment and teach me what it was like to walk in the shoes of the people I would lead. During the first eight weeks of my assignment as a corporate Vice President, I spent my days out working with our service workers, doing the service tasks we performed for 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 the US and 45 foreign countries. This experience often reminded me of my own imperfection and the need to seek guidance from above. To never ask someone to do something I was not willing to do myself and to periodically take the time to walk in the shoes of those I would lead.

Later in my career, the faces of our ServiceMaster workers would 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 actions had to pass their scrutiny, otherwise I was deceiving myself and those I was committed to serve.

As a business person, I wanted to excel at generating profit and creating value for our shareholders. If I didn't want to play by these rules, I didn't belong in the ballgame. But I also came to believe that the business firm had another purpose. It was to become my ministry, a place where I could live and share my faith in the way people were treated and cared for in the work environment, a place where the question of who God is and

how we relate our faith to our work were issues of discussion, debate, and yes, for some, a new understanding of how they would embrace and accept God's saving love for them.

Learning 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 the intent of your decision, but wrong in how you use power to implement that decision. The mistakes I have made as a leader that have hurt the most are those that have resulted in breached relationships with others. In the process of imposing what I thought was right, I ended up with a broken relationship. In such times, there was a need for admitting a mistake and seeking forgiveness and reconciliation.

Business has been my calling and the firm has become my channel of distribution for fulfilling and living my faith. A channel that for me has reached from the 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 to embrace and engage those who do not believe the way I do. People who God loves, and who, by my words and actions, should see the reality of that love, that Jesus lived and died for a purpose so that those He created may know Him as Lord and Savior. For me, this has been the end objective of my Cross-eyed view of leadership.

Now I realize that leadership for many of you will be directly involved with God's people in the context of a church or a related Christian organization. Your challenges and experiences will be different than mine. As the currents of Evangelical thought continue to move in various directions, with some seeking to interpret Scripture to fit the cultural trends of the day and others raising questions such as open theism, generous orthodoxy, or the wideness of God's mercy, you will have a growing appreciation of the foundations of your learning here at Gordon. It will be increasingly important for you, to know what you believe and why you believe it, to assume the responsibility for the people who are following and the direction you are leading them, to serve and be prepared to walk in the shoes of those sitting in the pew on Sunday, to be transparent about your mistakes and failures, remembering that your message need not be one of your own eloquence "but of Jesus Christ and Him crucified" and so to be Cross-eyed in your leadership of others.

As I was preparing for this talk, I asked for some advice from a pastor friend of mine who was retiring after serving over 40 years in leading the flock. He said, encourage those graduates "to press on, to take hold of that which Christ Jesus took hold of for them, to count others more significant than they are, to let the word of Christ dwell in them, and to have the mind of Christ." He was describing in his own way people who lead with their eyes fixed on the Cross. As you go forward this day, may God be with you and may you be strong and courageous as you walk with the Lord you love.