

## God at Work

This will be my last meeting with you as a director of our company. A little more than twenty-five years have passed since my first meeting in 1977. There has been much change and growth since then, but our focus on the value and worth of people remains.

During the Christmas holidays, there was a TV special dealing with the life and times of Peter Drucker. ServiceMaster was included in the story, with a specific reference to the time when Peter counseled with our board. He started that memorable meeting with one of his famous questions, “What is your business?”

The initial response from board members included cleaning floors and toilets, killing bugs and weeds, and a list of the jobs performed by our various business units. After a few minutes of polite listening, Peter told our board something I have never had the courage to say to you.

*You are all wrong. Your business is the training and development of people. You can't deliver a service without people. You can't deliver quality service without trained, motivated, and committed people. You package it in different ways to meet the needs of your customers, but your basic business is the training and development of people.*

Once again, Peter hit the nail on the head. But a question he did not ask that morning was, “Who are the people being trained and developed?” This additional question is one we ask at Service-Master, and our response has led us to our first objective: to honor God in all we do.

One way we honor Him is to recognize that all people have been created in His image. This truth is foundational to our training and development processes. Every person is special with their own fingerprint of potential. It is the whole person, not just a pair of hands, who comes to work every day, and it is the whole person God loves and in whom He sees His likeness reflected.

But people are different and have varying beliefs. Not all of them love God, know God, or even acknowledge His existence. Our mix of employees, customers, and shareholders covers the spectrum of beliefs and no belief.

As I leave this responsibility of serving with you, the question I have for you is not, “Who are the people we are training,” but, “Who is the God we so honor?”

## Who Is the God We Honor?

A world conference on Spirituality in Business was recently held in New York City. Hoping to develop a better understanding of the inner self and how it can be transformed within a business context, conference leaders created a visible symbol of God. It was comprised of religious icons, including Buddhist and Hindu gods, a Jewish candelabra, and a small statue of the Virgin Mary, all surrounded by bronze angels. This tribute to pluralism and an understanding of God as a source of spirituality was billed as an altar to multiculturalism.

As I read about this symbol of New Age philosophy, I could not help but think of the Apostle Paul’s experience in Athens when he saw an altar inscribed “To the Unknown God.” As he spoke to the council philosophers, Paul explained that rather

than worshipping an unknown god, they could put faith in the God who had made the world and everything in it and who provided a way for people to know and accept Him.

So how do we deal with the truth of God in a secular business context? Our legacy has been *inclusive but not pluralistic*. We have accepted and accommodated people of all faiths—and people of no faith. In so doing, we did not abandon or compromise the truth of God. The role of leadership at ServiceMaster was not to define or explain the differences between various religions. The determining factor for us was whether the truth of God informed how we viewed people and how we fulfilled our responsibility to develop them.

Our guiding principles recognize that every person has:

- ✦ *dignity and worth*, regardless of rank, title, position, race, gender or ability;
- ✦ *freedom of choice*, including the choice to accept or reject God and the choice to do good or evil;
- ✦ *potential to excel* at the work of their hands and minds and to grow and develop as they serve and produce;
- ✦ *immortality and eternal value* as the object of God’s love.

As we defined God in relationship to the people He created, we were inclusive but not pluralistic. Now for me as a Christian, the reality of God is found in Jesus Christ. My faith is centered upon a person who lived on this earth and who said He was “the Way, the Truth, and the Life.” Thus, the meaning and message of the truth of God for me includes the salvation story of Jesus Christ. For me this is not some evangelical addition to the truth; it is the truth.

### Truth Affirmed but Not Imposed

As both a follower of Jesus and a leader of ServiceMaster, I could not impose this truth upon others. However, I also could

not allow it to be diluted or confused if I intended to be true to my faith and to what was entrusted to me by my predecessors. In so doing, I was frequently confronted with the reality that the truth of what I believed and said was told in the words of my actions and relationships with others. As our founder, Marion Wade put it, “If you don’t live it, you don’t believe it.” This is the responsibility of leaders with a strong conviction about their faith. If the light of truth does not so shine, our efforts to be inclusive will become a mishmash of pluralism resulting in a failure to honor God.

Threading this needle has not been an easy task for me, and the challenges will become even greater in the future as our society becomes more multicultural and secular. There is a tension between our two objectives to honor God and to grow profitably. At times I pushed people too hard to meet quarter-to-quarter profit goals. There also were times when the sharing of my faith may have offended some or my actions may have been inconsistent with the principles of my faith. As those times occurred, I was reminded that the God of my faith called for confession, correction, and seeking forgiveness. As I became more transparent in my own imperfections, I was able to develop a stronger relationship with the people that I was responsible to lead.

So, as we look to the future, who is the God we will honor in ServiceMaster? This is a subject currently being considered by management. In light of all the changes now occurring at ServiceMaster, including the planning and direction for the “new” ServiceMaster, it is appropriate for the board also to consider this subject as part of its governing responsibilities. It should be a joint review with management, including a careful consideration of whether our first objective can continue to proclaim the truth of God while accommodating the diversity of beliefs in our culture. If it cannot, it should be eliminated as an objective of the company.

No one should be frightened over the size of this task.

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POINTS TO PONDER:

- ✦ It is a whole person, not just a pair of hands, who comes to work every day, and it is the whole person God loves and in whom He sees His likeness reflected.
- ✦ The truth of God is the determining factor for how we view people and how we fulfill our responsibility to develop them.
- ✦ For the truth of God to shine, leaders who share their faith must also live it.

*Questions:*

- ✦ What is your business?
- ✦ Does God fit in your business or in the way you treat and develop people? If so, what are some of the ways that you make this happen?
- ✦ What are some practical ways leaders can share and live their faith at work without imposing their faith?