

## **Management as a Christian Liberal Art\***

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C. William Pollard, the long-time serving past CEO of The ServiceMaster Company, was often inclined to remark that “management is a liberal art.” This is a phrase attributable to one of Pollard’s friends and consultants, Peter Drucker, the pioneer of the academic discipline of management. Several features of the phrase are worth noting. First of all, few managers or specialists in the field would be inclined to speak of management in this way; therefore, the phrase stands as a kind of anomaly, as an odd remark in the face of “conventional” thinking in which profit and the maximization of shareholder value typically reign prominently. Second, the phrase is remarkable to consider from an academic perspective in that “management” is usually housed within a school of business at a university whereas the “liberal arts” are locatable elsewhere on a university campus. As disciplinary rivalries go, business and the liberal arts do not always get along, and so the phrase is calling for a kind of interdisciplinary exchange that ideally can and should happen in academic settings but, unfortunately, oftentimes does not take place because of a host of factors, including academic and nonacademic ones. Third, it is remarkable that Pollard and Drucker were drawn to this phrase in that both of them were also people of faith. Whereas Drucker was not inclined to publicize his religious convictions, it was generally known that Drucker did find faith to be significantly important, not only personally at some level but professionally as well. Pollard, on the other hand, worked for a company whose ethos was explicitly religious. During Pollard’s tenure at the company, ServiceMaster was

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\* This article was made possible via a Bill Pollard Faith and Business Research Fellowship offered through the Center for Integrity and Business at Seattle Pacific University during June 2018.

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famous for having four objectives, the first of which was “To Honor God in All We Do.” Although this first objective raised a number of questions—and one could even say resistance—during Pollard’s leadership of ServiceMaster, he nevertheless persisted in highlighting and actually living it as part of his managerial style. Could it be that Drucker and Pollard found “management as a liberal art” compelling for their life and work in light of their religious convictions? Furthermore, could “management as a liberal art” be a way for Christians in particular to envision their role as managers in the workplace?

As promising and suggestive as the phrase is, “management as a liberal art” is exceedingly difficult to pin down. Part of the challenge surrounds the concept of the “liberal arts” overall. Plenty of arguments and proposals have been offered to account for the makeup and goals of the liberal arts, and these have taken place most recently within pressurized environments that openly question whether a liberal arts education “does anything” in terms of preparing someone for the job market (especially as the cost of education rises faster than inflation).<sup>1</sup> As for the goals of the liberal arts, these oftentimes have taken the form of a kind of cultivation of the human spirit, a move from potency to actuality with regard to a number of virtues and skills. In ancient Western conceptions, these spanned the disciplines of grammar, rhetoric, logic, arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy. Various philosophical disciplines were added to subsequent iterations of the liberal arts. All in all, one prominent vision was that the liberal arts would build character—that they would form and develop leaders who are able to lead both by example and in an honorable way so that the institutions they lead may flourish under their stewardship. The challenge here, of course, is that within our current moral frameworks, it is not at all clear if the idea of character is coherent or appealing. For German

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<sup>1</sup> For a counterargument to this trend, see Randall Stross, *A Practical Education* (Stanford: Redwood Press, 2017).

culture in which the notion of *Bildung* is available, the idea of character may make more sense than for, say, American culture (and for that matter, American corporate culture).

Therefore, as appealing as the phrase “management as a liberal art” is, it is in need of significant elaboration and substantiation so that it can mean something compelling in our current environment. As a gesture toward that end, the phrase will be considered through two distinct phases. The first phase would involve the phrase’s origins; therefore, a brief survey of its role within Drucker’s thought will be offered. The second phase would involve the witness and work of Bill Pollard. Pollard both appealed to the phrase and tried to make it evident in his managerial style while at ServiceMaster. However, in distinction to Drucker’s tendencies to be private on religious matters, Pollard attempted to use this phrase while maintaining a public Christian witness. And so Pollard represents a modification of the phrase, one that is best described as a Christian transmutation, making it “management as a *Christian* liberal art.” That phrase may sound even stranger to the occasional onlooker than Drucker’s original, but it can make sense when cast in light of the longstanding tradition of Christian liberal arts colleges and universities within the United States that aim to embody and promote a tradition of the “Christian liberal art.” Pollard, I will argue, did just this within the area of corporate management.

### **I. Drucker’s Intent and Usage**

In a constructive survey of Drucker’s approach to management, Joseph A. Maciariello and Karen E. Linkletter remark that Drucker’s “most pressing concern was that organizations concern themselves with people” and they go on to add, “organizations must provide human beings with status, function, and a sense of community and purpose. Viewed in this context, the management

of people within organizations involves an understanding of human and cultural or communal values and morals.”<sup>2</sup> This observation means that in Drucker’s mind organizations ought to reflect a kind of moral and value code—one that people can embody, promote, and hold themselves accountable to. This belief stems from the central place that Drucker generally gave organizations. Drucker believed that the institution, alongside the family, was best positioned to give the modern person a sense of purpose and meaningfulness because it can foster deeply human bonds. In this sense, leading organizations can be cast as a kind of public service for the welfare of humankind. Reflecting the point, Maciariello and Linkletter remark, “Drucker believed that, because human beings are always subject to management, the practice of management must aim to create and maintain healthy organizations in which people can find meaningful existence.”<sup>3</sup>

When Drucker remarked that “management was a liberal art,” he saw each of the main terms doing specific work. Of course, he spent a lifetime defining and elaborating on management, which he believed largely revolved around getting things done via people. Its function is “to make people capable of joint performance through common goals, common values, the right structure, and the training and development they need to perform and to respond to change.”<sup>4</sup> But management is not just a technical skill or results/performance oriented. If it has people at its core, then management needs to somehow be human-oriented in a fundamental and overarching way. For this reason, management necessarily has to draw from many different disciplines for their insights, ways of knowing, varied ways of thinking, and so on so that the execution of management can be multifaceted, multidimensional, and expansively effective.

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<sup>2</sup> *Drucker’s Lost Art of Management* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2011), p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> *Drucker’s Lost Art of Management*, p. 25.

<sup>4</sup> Peter F. Drucker, *The New Realities* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), p. 222. As for what managers actually do, he elaborates in his seminal volume that they set objectives, organize, motivate/communicate, measure, and develop people (see *Management*, revised edition [San Francisco: Collins, 2008], p. 8).

Maciariello and Linkletter note, “Drucker believed that managers must also be able to address not just questions of efficiency and profitability but also larger, more philosophical questions of morality, spirituality, emotional well-being, and dignity.”<sup>5</sup> The tool-set required for this more expansive approach would be the tradition of the liberal art, “‘liberal’ because it deals with the fundamentals of knowledge, self-knowledge, wisdom, and leadership; ‘art’ because it is practice and application.”<sup>6</sup>

What this would mean in a corporate setting is hard to anticipate or prognosticate, but at least it involves the following in terms of workers. First, it would mean that managers create and sustain a corporate culture in which people can find status and meaning in what they do. This is no small matter given the pressures of industrialization in which people can sometimes be utilized via an assembly-line model, either literally or figuratively. But the main point can be sustained when the values of the individual and the values of the corporation are to some degree in alignment. Second, and connected to the first, this corporate culture should offer respect and dignity for each individual worker regardless of rank or level within the institution. Each worker is to be identified and valued as essential to the institution’s functioning. With this value at the forefront of corporate culture, the deleterious and sinister effects of corporate stratification and power can be identified and actively resisted. One way of actively resisting this tendency is through a third point: Empowering workers with responsibility and decision-making power over the areas that are most pertinent and related to their working life. This kind of empowerment at some level democratizes and creates a sense of citizenship among workers—that they too are involved in shaping the culture and ethos of an institution. On all these points related to workers and their connection to and role within the institution, there is a deep commitment to human

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<sup>5</sup> *Drucker’s Lost Art of Management*, p. 26.

<sup>6</sup> Drucker, *The New Realities*, p. 231. Drucker continues: “Managers draw on all the knowledges and insights of the humanities and the social sciences . . . . But they have to focus this knowledge on effectiveness and results” (ibid.).

potential and growth, a value which is a hallmark of the tradition of the liberal arts, which aims at the capacitation and refinement of the human spirit.

At play would be markers of a specific kind of management style. A point to highlight here would be the interplay between continuity and change. Rather than seeing these as opposites—as a kind of traditional “this is how we have always done it” versus a “let’s change everything in a revolutionary way because ‘out with the old’”—Drucker saw them, according to Maciariello and Linkletter, as “poles”: “The more an institution is organized for innovation and change, the more it will have to balance change with mechanisms that facilitate continuity.”<sup>7</sup> This kind of sensibility of recognizing that the question is not choosing the better option of the two but rather maintaining an active tension between both, which is a kind of “both-and” inclination rather than an “either-or” one, is deeply embedded within the aims of a liberal arts approach to reality. This is so because the liberal arts recognize that reality generally and humans particularly are exceedingly complex, and one framework or one account of “success” or “progress” is simply insufficient and inadequate.

Perhaps one of the most important features of “management as a liberal art” is the manager’s character. Working with people, developing them, and setting and leading by example all imply that the manager must be a person of integrity. As Drucker notes, we are not talking here about likability or genius; the manager must bring something to the task, that being a formed and shaped character.<sup>8</sup> When speaking of character, one must point to a formed person who develops virtues and values over time that have some degree of reliability and permanence. As noted, the liberal arts has often been cast as a kind of training in character. Certainly other factors are involved in the formation of character, but the liberal arts can have a role in such a

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<sup>7</sup> *Drucker’s Lost Art of Management*, p. 49. They continue: “Of utmost importance during times of rapid change are effective communication mechanisms that facilitate common understanding and trust among stakeholders.”

<sup>8</sup> Drucker, *Management*, p. 10.

process. In an era in which corporate greed and scandal are common themes in business news, the liberal arts and the humanities can “acquire recognition, impact, and relevance.”<sup>9</sup>

## II. Pollard’s Embodiment of the Phrase

In his book of personal reflections, Bill Pollard ponders on his relationship to Peter Drucker in the following way, “Drucker took an interest in the ServiceMaster business model because he saw us implementing his view of management as a liberal art as we sought to affirm the role of faith without imposing it while doing business. He saw ServiceMaster as not only an example of a successful business, but also as a moral community committed to the development of human character.”<sup>10</sup> Of course, Pollard did not found ServiceMaster, and so a significant amount of credit must be given to the early leaders of the company for its particular ethos. These leaders include Marion Wade (founder), Ken Hansen, and Ken Wessner. When Pollard joined ServiceMaster in 1977, it was clear throughout the interview process that he was joining something already pre-established, namely “a framework . . . that included a commitment to integrate the claims of . . . Christian faith with the demands of . . . work.”<sup>11</sup> When Pollard took the helm of ServiceMaster, he continued this tradition as the company faced new challenges, possibilities, and significant growth. The result was an approach to management that cast it not simply as a liberal art but as a Christian liberal art in that the moral and spiritual framework that helped shape the culture of ServiceMaster was generally theistic and particularly Christian in orientation. This culture was highlighted by the four objectives the company promoted for itself

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<sup>9</sup> Drucker, *Management*, p. 25.

<sup>10</sup> C. William Pollard, *The Tides of Life* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2014), p. 43. For more reflections on Drucker by Pollard, see “Management as a Liberal Art (Summary)” (2017). C. William Pollard Papers. 231. [http://digitalcommons.spu.edu/pollard\\_papers/231](http://digitalcommons.spu.edu/pollard_papers/231) as well as “Various Handwritten Notes Regarding Peter Drucker” (2017). C. William Pollard Papers. 213.

<sup>11</sup> Pollard, *The Tides of Life*, p. 43.

(the first of which was already mentioned): 1) To honor God in all they did, 2) to help people develop, 3) to pursue excellence, and 4) to grow profitably. As Pollard noted, the first two were “end goals” and the latter two “means goals.” These objectives provided ServiceMaster “with a reference point for seeking to do that which is right and avoiding that which is wrong.”<sup>12</sup>

Several gestures show this orientation quite vividly, creatively, and imaginatively. For instance, when Pollard was first hired at ServiceMaster, he spent several weeks doing the tasks of ServiceMaster employees at all levels, an experience that led even to a curious encounter with a distant relative.<sup>13</sup> This kind of experience, however, did several things. First, it gave Pollard the real, hands-on experience of his colleagues so that he could understand better their roles and challenges. Further, it dignified the work of his employees in that Pollard showed it to be worth paying attention to with his time and effort. As a result, it dignified ServiceMaster’s employees themselves by indicating that all were essential to the company’s running and success. Other impactful gestures included the removal of select parking spots for company executives and the erection of glass walls inside their corporate headquarters that in turn allowed all to see executive office spaces as a good-will gesture of transparency. These and other examples are simply indicators of a broader culture of awareness and execution that may not be typical in American corporate culture but made good sense for a company that explicitly attempted to honor God in all that they did.

More broadly, this orientation was at the heart of an ethos that attended to what people were becoming within the context of work itself. Given the work that ServiceMaster was about, one could think that its employees would just go about their tasks in a routine and mundane way.

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<sup>12</sup> Pollard, *The Soul of the Firm* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), pp. 18-19.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Bill Pollard on June 27, 2018. In *The Soul of the Firm*, Pollard goes into more detail on the experience: Pollard worked “with the housekeeping team at Lutheran General Hospital cleaning corridors, patient rooms, and even bathrooms and toilets” to the deep surprise of a distant relative of his wife, who went on to ask him, “Is everything all right at home?” (see Pollard, *The Soul of the Firm*, pp. 14-15).

However, Pollard suggests that workers can take initiative, care for their work, and be shaped by it when managers recognize their potential, dignity, and worth. In *The Soul of the Firm*, Pollard recounts example after example of people (by name and by their various roles) who worked in ServiceMaster and went on to achieve wonderful things for themselves. These stories are not simply success stories of people moving up the corporate ladder as much as indicators of a corporate culture that sees people as ends/subjects rather than means/objects. In other words, management as a Christian liberal art for Pollard means seeing the dignity and potential of all, and in turn having a deep desire to see people flourish and grow.

Issues of character and personal conviction are front and center in Pollard's managerial style. He was aware that every leader must come to terms with basic questions of belief: of what one believes and why one believes it.<sup>14</sup> These questions relate to character certainly in that they point to the fundamental distinctions between good and evil, of what is right and wrong, of what is worth prioritizing and sacrificing for and what is less important. Pollard continuously wrestled with these questions as a manager, and they are a major factor in his orientation toward management as a Christian liberal art.

Perhaps one of the most significant fruits of Pollard attempting to live out his Christian convictions in the workplace is his awareness both of pain and the need for reconciliation. Some of Pollard's basic convictions include that "life begins with dying to self and freedom comes from surrendering to [God's] way," for "in God's plan, our pain is often the crucible for understanding His love."<sup>15</sup> This awareness of pain and death not only stems from personal experiences (including the loss of his father early in his life) but also a deep sense of the need for a cruciform existence. How this translates to the workplace is worthy of mention. In Pollard's

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<sup>14</sup> See Pollard, C. William, "Do You Know What You Believe and Why You Believe It?" (2017). C. William Pollard Papers. 199. [http://digitalcommons.spu.edu/pollard\\_papers/199](http://digitalcommons.spu.edu/pollard_papers/199). Accessed on July 10, 2018.

<sup>15</sup> Pollard, *The Tides of Life*, p. 57.

passing reflections, he is willing to state that he probably asked for forgiveness on a more regular basis than most other Fortune 500 CEOs.<sup>16</sup> The reflection is not meant to be self-congratulatory, but it is a challenge to corporate management culture as well as indicative of the manner in which Pollard approached his role as a manager. In this very real sense, management was a Christian liberal art for Pollard in that he showed a Christological set of virtues: confessing wrongdoing, seeking forgiveness, and generally moving human relationships toward reconciliation.<sup>17</sup>

Another personal conviction on display as part of Pollard's managerial style was his keen awareness of his place in God's plans. With the power, privilege, and money that come with leading a successful company, it would be easy for Pollard to work out of a sense of entitlement. But his continued desire to ask the "big questions of life"—something very much at the heart of the liberal arts—led him to reflect continuously on his place in everything. His conclusion was again reflective of a deep Christian sensibility: "I have concluded the only reason I have something that somebody else doesn't have, whether that something is money, possessions, education, talent, or opportunity, is not for me to own or control it, but to use, share, or invest it so that it will increase and be of benefit to others. My role is that of a steward or trustee, not an owner. God is the owner."<sup>18</sup> Such an attitude and approach makes "honoring God in all we do" not simply platitudinous but deeply orienting—it gives a significant hue and perspective in all that transpires in the day-to-day happenings of corporate life.

### III. Conclusion

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<sup>16</sup> Interview with Bill Pollard on June 27, 2018.

<sup>17</sup> This view has been confirmed by others, as Pollard notes of an employee's remarks about ServiceMaster: "I have found in ServiceMaster an openness to address what is wrong and to seek—and extend—forgiveness, and then to expect changed behavior" (*The Soul of the Firm*, p. 40).

<sup>18</sup> Pollard, *The Tides of Life*, p. 79.

As suggestive as the phrase “management as a liberal art” is, it is in need of substantiation and application. Drucker highlighted the phrase as an effort to orient management to people—not just in terms of their contributions or utility for an organization but in terms of their entire selves. This would apply both to employees at all levels as well as to managers and executives. One particular case that exemplified this approach was William Pollard’s leadership at ServiceMaster. By building on what he received in terms of the corporate culture at ServiceMaster, Pollard sought to live out Drucker’s phrase in a particular way, one which is best described as “management as a Christian liberal art.” Given that a Christian liberal art “sees God at the center of everything,”<sup>19</sup> such an orientation can only lead to a distinct way of managing people with a full recognition of their value, dignity, and potential.

Of course, such an approach is not popular and in fact quite controversial. Pollard relates in *The Soul of the Firm* how a shareholder of ServiceMaster once remarked, “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.”<sup>20</sup> Pollard’s response is telling: He counters the reader with questions, including if there is common ground between God and profit. Pollard’s response? “Profit is a means in God’s world to be used and invested, not an end to be worshiped. . . . For us, the common link between God and profit is people.”<sup>21</sup> What Pollard went on to implement as a result of this orientation was a vision that all could get behind: “Whether or not you share my belief or the claim of God as creator, you should examine the reality of the results of ServiceMaster. Regardless of your starting point, the principle that can be embraced by all is the dignity and worth of every person—every worker. It

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<sup>19</sup> Jeffrey C. Davis and Philip G. Ryken, *Liberal Arts for the Christian Life* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), p. 29.

<sup>20</sup> As quoted in Pollard, *The Soul of the Firm*, pp. 19-20.

<sup>21</sup> Pollard, *The Soul of the Firm*, p. 20.

becomes a living principle as the mission of the firm is understood to include the personal development and growth of that worker.”<sup>22</sup> These reflections are challenging and inspiring, suggesting that management as a Christian liberal art is not only possible but attractive in an environment in which too many corporations seem to have no soul and their executives little character.

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<sup>22</sup> Pollard, *The Soul of the Firm*, p. 21.