



## Interview: Bill Peel

*For more than 25 years, Bill Peel has helped people identify their calling and live out their faith at work. Bill's own calling now rises to serve as founding Executive Director of The Center for Faith and Work at LeTourneau University ([www.centerforfaithandwork.com](http://www.centerforfaithandwork.com)). Meanwhile, Bill's an award-winning author whose books (now in multiple languages) include Workplace Grace (Zondervan 2010), What God Does When Men Lead (Tyndale, 2008), Going Public With Your Faith (Zondervan 2003), Discover Your Destiny (NavPress, 1996). He holds a master's degree from Dallas Theological Seminary, and he is a doctoral candidate at Gordon-Conwell Seminary. Bill and his wife, Kathy, have three grown sons, four grandchildren, and live in Dallas, Texas.*

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*David W. Gill: Tell us about the Center for Faith and Work at LeTourneau University.*

Bill Peel: The Center came out of the university's strategic plan created in 2010. President Dale Lunsford and the Trustees purposefully wanted to carry on the legacy of the university's founder, R. G. LeTourneau. A huge part of Mr. LeTourneau's personal mission was to bring his faith into his business. When he was 30, he made a commitment to give his whole life to Christ. Although he loved his work, he thought that "going all out for Christ" would mean giving up business and becoming a missionary, preacher, or evangelist. So he went to his pastor and they prayed about this together. His pastor told him, "Brother LeTourneau, God needs business people as much as he needs pastors and missionaries." So Mr. LeTourneau gave his business to the Lord, and from that point on he always said that God was his "business partner."

*Gill: What kind of business did he pursue?*

Peel: LeTourneau was an engineering genius. He was one of the great fathers of big earth moving machines and held 300 patents. LeTourneau machines made up 70 percent of the machinery in World War II for American engineers in Europe and in the South Pacific. After the war many of his inventions were used to create the automobile and highway infrastructure of America.

*Gill: That is very unusual to have a pastor back then encourage him toward business.*

Peel: It happened in Stockton, California, where he got his business start. Once he realized God had called him to business, he didn't have many resources to help him figure out how to live his faith at work. But he had the Bible, and he was always alert for others he could talk about it. When he moved a plant to Peoria in the 1930s, he found other business people, many of them in Chicago, with a similar commitment to serve God in their businesses. They started meeting together and helping each other figure out what faith in the workplace meant.

**Gill: Was that Chicago group the CBMC --- the Christian Businessmen's Committee?**

Peel: Yes, that group became CBMC --- which now has 90,000 members worldwide. He was part of the first steering committee.

**Gill: So how did he get from California to Illinois to Texas --- and to founding a university?**

Peel: Right after World War II, Mr. LeTourneau looked for a place to put a plant to build his equipment. We're talking about gigantic machines that have to be shipped by train. He wanted a location that would be close to a source of steel, so he ended up in Longview, Texas. LeTourneau opened a plant in Longview, and just across the street was the decommissioned Harmon Army Hospital, just sitting there in 1946, unused. The fellow who recruited him to come to Longview told Mr. LeTourneau that he could probably buy it pretty cheap.

That hospital became LeTourneau Technical Institute. Most of the early students were G.I.'s who were coming out of the military service. LeTourneau developed a creative work-study program for them. The students were divided into two groups. One group would work at his plant Monday/Wednesday/Friday and go to class and study on Tuesday/Thursday/Saturday. A second group would follow the reverse schedule.

**Gill: This was great for keeping the factory running all week**

Peel: Yes, but it was also a great way to learn and pay for your education. Even more important, on the educational side, students were actually applying their engineering skills as they learned them. That was a real distinctive that Mr. LeTourneau emphasized. And it continues today. When engineers graduate from LeTourneau University they know how to go to work the next day. They don't have to be re-trained. That was always been part of Mr. LeTourneau's educational philosophy. He only finished seventh grade and the rest of his education and was totally self-taught, so he wanted everything taught to be very concrete and very practical.

**Gill: So when LeTourneau was concerned about faith at work, what did that actually mean? Was it about a different theology and philosophy of work? Different ethics and values?**

Peel: LeTourneau believed that God created the world, put all the resources here, and meant for us to develop the earth to the fullest. He had a rather sophisticated theology of work for someone of his era, especially for someone with a limited educational background. When he was inventing/designing a new machine, LeTourneau believed it was God working through him giving him the ingenuity. He once commented that there may not be a logical explanation for his development of the digger, but there was a theological one, and it's available everyone.

LeTourneau's machines literally changed the face of the earth. Many of the machines used to build America's interstate highway system were made by LeTourneau. Those of us who were around in the 1950s and 1960s watching the highways being built, can remember these humongous machines that, instead of pushing the dirt, would scoop it up to move it. Those scrapers, as they were called, were LeTourneau's inventions.

Something else interesting about Mr. LeTourneau was his practice of reverse tithing—giving away 90 percent and living off 10 percent. He believed the profits of his business belonged to God. He once said, "When I think about giving money it's not how much of my money do I want to give to God, but how much of His money does He want me to keep?" Near the end of the Depression when the company finally turned the corner and made a significant profit, Mr. LeTourneau and his wife made a calculated decision to cap their lifestyle. Mr. LeTourneau proposed that they give away 50 percent of the profit. But Mrs. LeTourneau, who was quite a leader in her own right, told her husband that she had never needed more than 10 percent of the profit they'd made that year to run the household. The reverse tithe was born.

In the 1940s and 1950s, LeTourneau was a well-known Christian lay leader across the country. He was featured in *Ripley's Believe It or Not* and in *Life* magazine. He was also one of the first executives to use corporate aviation. He flew between his plants, and on the weekends would fly to speak all over the country. I run into people today, now in their sixties and heads of companies, who heard Mr. LeTourneau speak when they were kids. Many of them felt a call to business and ended up attending LeTourneau University.

**Gill: Is the Center for Faith and Work more internally focused on LeTourneau -- or on external outreach from the university – or both?**

Peel: The Center focuses on three arenas: First is the campus, which involves students and faculty (1300 students in residence and 1300 on line). My job is to champion faith at work on campus, so we bring in Christian business leaders to campus to speak to the students. We keep the conversation going about faith at work in various ways on campus. One example is group of students who are the "R.G. LeTourneau Faith at Work Scholars." We designed a specific program for them that includes a sophisticated gift assessment program to help them identify their calling and giftedness. Eventually, we hope to take this program campus wide. Next year we're bringing faith-at-work thought leaders to every one of our schools: engineering, aviation, business, education, nursing, and arts and sciences.

Secondly, we serve the church. The university is very committed to the church. While some in the faith at work movement have shaken the dust off their feet as far as the church is concerned, I don't believe we have the right to do that. We have a host of resources on our web site for churches, as well as simple things pastors can do to support faith at work among their people. The Center has done quite a bit of research in this area. We've commissioned three research projects/polls—two with the Barna group and one with Lifeway, assessing where the church is on faith at work. We've also partnered with the High Calling to create a whole array of resources to help churches celebrate work on Labor Day.

Our third area of focus is the global Christian community, including our alumni and beyond. We're committed to equipping and encouraging people in living out their faith at work. We do this through conferences, small groups, articles, books, and lots of helpful content on our web site.

**Gill: Do you work with theological seminaries --- Dallas Seminary is in your town for example.**

Peel: As a graduate of Dallas Seminary myself, I've been encouraging the faith and work discussion for years. DTS Professor Howard Hendricks served on the Center's Advisory Council before his health took a dive and he died a year and a half ago. Prof Hendricks told me his greatest disappointment was not doing a better job preparing seminary graduates to disciple people in and for the workplace. But interest is growing. One of the DTS Hendricks Center conferences this year was on faith at work, and we helped them put together their speaker and workshop leader list.

**Gill: How did you get involved in the faith at work movement?**

Peel: My dad was a great man who started out in business and went back to school to become a pastor when he was 34 years old. Although I was raised in a pastor's home, I escaped the house without coming to know Christ because I looked like I had a faith and I was interested in church. But I didn't understand Jesus and what he had done for me until I was sitting in my dorm room at SMU and a Campus Crusade guy shared the gospel with my roommate. It was a huge revelation to me that Jesus Christ died for Bill Peel, not just the sins of the world.

I graduated from SMU and went straight into Dallas Seminary for four years. When I finished my degree, I had the privilege of going to work for a church in Fort Worth. Bill Garrison was an attorney, an elder at the church, and a leader in the faith at work movement. He took me to lunch and said to me, "Peel, God's heroes don't stand behind pulpits." Over the next few years it slowly dawned on me that the workplace is where the action is. Although my theology of work took several years to develop, it really started there.

**Gill: So after that, then what?**

Peel: I was 30 years old when we moved to Tyler, Texas, where I was raised, and I pastored a church. I found myself wanting to spend most of my time working with people in the workplace and talking to them about what faith meant there. I was teaching through the book of Colossians when I got to chapter 3 and it all kind of came together. When Doug Sherman and Bill Hendricks published *Your Work Matters to God* in 1987, it pushed me over the edge. I ended up leaving the pastorate and began discipling people in the workplace in East and Central Texas.

**Gill: So you were kind of an informal chaplain to workplace people.**

Peel: Exactly. I'd travel to different cities and lead small groups early in the morning with business leaders, then launch them out on their own. In 1993, I began working with the Christian Medical and Dental Association and zeroed in on the medical profession for the next seven years. As I met with physicians and asked how we could serve them, many of them wanted to know how to make their medical practice a ministry. And specifically, they wanted to know how to share their faith. They saw medicine as a tremendous opportunity for evangelism, but they couldn't use the Campus Crusade model or even James Kennedy's diagnostic questions in the office or a hospital room. So many of them gave up trying.

I decided to create a course on that topic with a family physician, Dr. Walt Larimore. We shared the same vision of evangelism, and I brought some theology of work to the table. We developed a course called the "Saline Solution" which became one of the most popular continuing medical education courses in the country—until our CE credits were yanked because we were "too religious." I worked with CMDA to put

the course on videotape, so it has now been taught around the world. We recently updated the course and videos, which debuted this fall entitled “Grace Prescriptions.”

From the beginning, we encouraged physicians to bring other people who weren’t in healthcare to Saline conferences. These attendees kept telling us that the material we were teaching wasn’t just relevant for doctors. They wanted to take it and apply it in their accounting practice or real estate office or wherever. We talked Zondervan into publishing a book for the broader audience, and in 2003 *Workplace Grace* won a Silver Medallion award and the *Christianity Today* Book of the Year award for Evangelism and Discipleship. This year we’ve updated and shortened the book to make the information a lot more accessible. We’re releasing it this fall to commemorate the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary of R.G. LeTourneau’s birth.

**Gill: So CMDA was seven years from 1993-2000.**

Peel: I left CMDA in 2000 to pilot a workplace ministry in a Dallas church. Then in 2005, I went back out on my own again as a writer, speaker, and informal workplace chaplain until I was offered the opportunity to create a Center for Faith and Work at LeTourneau University. LeTourneau is an unusual place, and it’s such a privilege to be here. It’s the only Christian University founded by a businessman. With faith and work as part of its DNA, it has a major contribution to make to the faith and work movement.

A few years earlier, I learned that Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary had pioneered a Doctor of Ministry program in Workplace Theology, Ethics, and Leadership. The founder of that program, Haddon Robinson, was one of my professors at DTS. I had not intended to do any more formal schooling, but this got my attention. One of the reasons I enrolled in the program at Gordon-Conwell was because I didn’t have many people around me to bat concepts around and argue with over important matters of faith-work integration. The program has provided the opportunity for serious discussion and debate and has sharpened me up in a lot of areas where I needed it. It’s also helped me engage with people in the faith at work movement in other parts of the country.

As I’ve traveled internationally it’s really fun to see faith at work going on in faraway places where it’s obvious that God’s Spirit brought it there, not us. It seems that the Spirit is erupting in workplaces all over the world. This is very exciting.

**Gill: What’s next for the movement in your view?**

Peel: The church is a big deal. While there are good marketplace ministries here and there, they can only touch a miniscule part of the workforce. They simply can’t do it by themselves. But the church! For example, in Dallas a huge part of the workforce is in church on Sunday morning. It’s exciting to see some pastors awakening to the fact that the biggest chunk of the people sitting in the pews Sunday morning will spend the next six days out in the workplace, and they need to be prepared for that. If the church is not forming people in the workplace for Christ, then the workplace is forming their values. That is not good for the people or the church.

Evangelism is also on my mind a lot. It’s often a scary topic for people who are into the theology of work. But it’s really important. Think about this: the average person in the pew has 25 contacts with non-Christians during the week. So for a church of 1000, the reach is 25,000 that can be influenced. We’re ambassadors for Christ, and the workplace is the field awaiting cultivation, planting, and harvest. But we’ve also got to live out our faith. If we don’t have a theology of work that salts our work practices and our life, then our witness will not be attractive to people. Our life and our words have to work together. We need to act the gospel before we tell the gospel.