
IS BUSINESS AS MISSION (BAM) A FLAWED CONCEPT?

A REFORMED CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO THE BAM MOVEMENT

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IS THE CHRISTIAN BUSINESS ACADEMY AND PRACTITIONER COMMUNITY IN DANGER OF UNDERMINING ITSELF?

I was increasingly troubled and provoked as the Saturday morning plenary session unfolded at the CBFA conference back in October of 2010. The plenary session was a panel discussion/presentation entitled “Business as Mission: A Discipline Gathering Momentum.” The title of the session itself was enough to grab my attention and get me *in* my seat. As I settled into that seat I asked myself some questions: “Is business a mission, or is business simply business?” and “If BAM is an academic discipline, what does that mean for my plain old discipline of ‘business as business?’” Once settled, some of the thoughts espoused by the panel (among them, that “BAM is an academic discipline worthy of major programs of study” and “the Great Commission and church planting go hand-in-hand with business enterprise”) were almost enough to make me literally fall *out* of my seat. That moment, coupled with the invitation from JBIB to respond to Steve Rundle’s fine context-setting paper for this special issue on organizational hybridization, catalyzed this response. Interestingly, the very concept of organizational hybridization itself prompts response on my part, as discussed in more detail later in this paper.

But I begin by applauding the collective work of the thought leaders (Johnson, 2009; Lai, 2005;

Rundle & Steffen, 2003; Russell, 2009) in the BAM movement. As expertly outlined by Rundle, the BAM enthusiasts and thought leaders have admirably pushed the business academic and practitioner communities to think intentionally about business. Much of their thinking resonates with me in that it recognizes the pervasive impact that business has on God’s world, as they sound a clarion call for business to be conducted in ways that bring good to society. But has their conceptualization of the “good” that business is to bring to society been taken too far or misapprehended in some key ways? I propose that perhaps it has.

Put simply, I am troubled by the BAM movement as I believe it has the potential to undermine the legitimacy of Christian business education and practice. This is particularly true given the systematic Reformed theological tradition (Calvin, 2007; Kuyper, 1931; McGrath, 1990; NAPARC¹) that shapes the way I think about business and understand its essential role as a key component of God’s good creation. Thus, in the balance of this paper I attempt to demonstrate how Reformed theological principles lead me to posit that BAM is perhaps fundamentally flawed in the following key ways:

1. BAM is based on a dualistic foundation: BAM actually reinforces the false sacred/secular dichotomy by positioning business as mission as sacred, and business as business as secular. In contrast, Reformed theology declares *all* legitimate business

work as a sacred means of imaging God and contributing to the ongoing revelation of His kingdom

2. BAM reinforces a dual-class citizenship: Related to the first point, BAM creates a dual-class citizenship among business academics and practitioners alike. In contrast, Reformed theology declares *all* of God's people working in business or in *any* other context as co-creators with Him, equally but differentially contributing to the ongoing revelation of His kingdom.
3. BAM violates God's sovereign intent for His creation: BAM imposes the God-given/designed mandate of the church onto business, and vice-versa. Contrastingly, the Reformed tradition celebrates God's good intent for business as being separate and distinct from His good intent for the organized church.
4. BAM undermines profit: BAM distorts the core essentials of business, thereby threatening sustainable business enterprise. In contrast, Reformed theology reinforces profit making as a morally and religiously sound mandate unique to business.
5. BAM is inauthentic: BAM enterprises run the risk of disenfranchising many of their stakeholders due to mixed motives and lack of full disclosure. In contrast, Reformed theology celebrates the ideal of business being a primary means of extending shalom to all people, and even to all of creation.

Before commencing with the heart of the argument (organized around these five proposed flaws) two specific words of caution and clarification are warranted. First, I am not questioning the BAM movement in its *entirety*. As mentioned above, there is much about the movement that resonates with me. For example, BAM clearly calls Christian business professionals to be integral in their actions by living out their faith through business practice. This is of course good and right, and even essential in order for business

to thrive as God intends. Second, I am not positioning the Reformed theological tradition as the *only* source of normative Christian thought relative to business practice. I simply chose to speak out of that tradition because I personally find it compelling and informative as a means of investigating the merits of the BAM movement. That said, I know that I have much to consider from other Christian traditions, and I am hopeful that this response fosters dialogue in that vein.

SUMMARIZING THE DIRECT TENETS AND INDIRECT IMPLICATIONS OF THE BAM MOVEMENT

In order to further set the stage for direct discussion of the flaws that I propose relative to BAM, the major tenets and related implications of the BAM movement must be summarized. To be sure, the BAM literature (including Rundle's paper herein) does not use the language I delineate below to describe BAM. In fact, as conveyed by Rundle's acknowledgement of his "evolving" view of what broadly constitutes a BAM business, it's almost as if the BAM enthusiasts and thought leaders don't want to "fess up" to the core/essential distinctives of BAM. But I would propose that a review of the BAM movement and related literature leads to a clear picture of these "essentials" of the BAM "doctrine." And while an admittedly macro-level view is conveyed here, I believe that these "essentials" (major/direct tenets of BAM) include the following:

Direct Tenets

1. BAM places evangelization at the core of the purpose of a business enterprise. In short, a BAM company exists to evangelize the nations. A company without this as a core purpose is not a BAM company.
2. BAM places spiritual development at the core of the purpose of a business enterprise. That is, a BAM company exists to disciple the nations. A company without this as a core purpose is not a BAM company.

3. BAM prioritizes the least-developed and least-evangelized parts of the world. Put simply, a BAM company exists to develop the nations. A company without this as a core purpose is not a BAM company.

Again, these tenets are not explicitly espoused (at least not universally) by the BAM thought leaders and enthusiasts. But I suggest that a plenary review of the movement leads precisely to these conclusions.

With these major/direct tenets serving as the foundation, the following indirect implications can be discerned (each of which corresponds in kind with the proposed flaws introduced above):

Indirect Implications

1. BAM companies represent God's true intent for business.

2. BAM business students and practitioners are truly doing God's work.
3. BAM companies rightly embrace the Great Commission as an organizational mandate.
4. BAM companies are ministries, and thus rightly resist profit maximization as an organizational mandate.
5. BAM companies (occasionally) rightly distort and/or conceal their core intentions relative to evangelism and discipleship.

To further galvanize and provide a macro-level overview of my response, all of this (including related Reformed theological responses) is conveyed by Table 1 below.

Table 1: The Direct Tenets and Indirect Implications of BAM, and Related Reformed Theological Responses

Direct Tenets of BAM	Indirect Implications of BAM	Reformed Response
BAM companies exist to evangelize the nations. BAM companies exist to disciple the nations. BAM companies exist to develop the nations.	BAM companies represent God's true intent for business.	Business is a sacred calling.
	BAM business students and practitioners are truly doing God's work.	
	BAM companies rightly embrace the Great Commission as an organizational mandate.	Business is about pursuing the Cultural Mandate and extending common grace.
	BAM companies are ministries, and thus rightly resist profit maximization as an organizational mandate.	Business is about stewarding resources in pursuit of profit.
	BAM companies (occasionally) rightly distort and/or conceal their core intentions relative to evangelism and discipleship.	Business is about extending shalom to stakeholders.

REFORMED RESPONSES TO BAM

We can now turn to more detailed discussion of the proposed flaws of BAM. To do so I address each of the proposed flaws in the order introduced above, illuminating each from the perspective of Reformed theology.

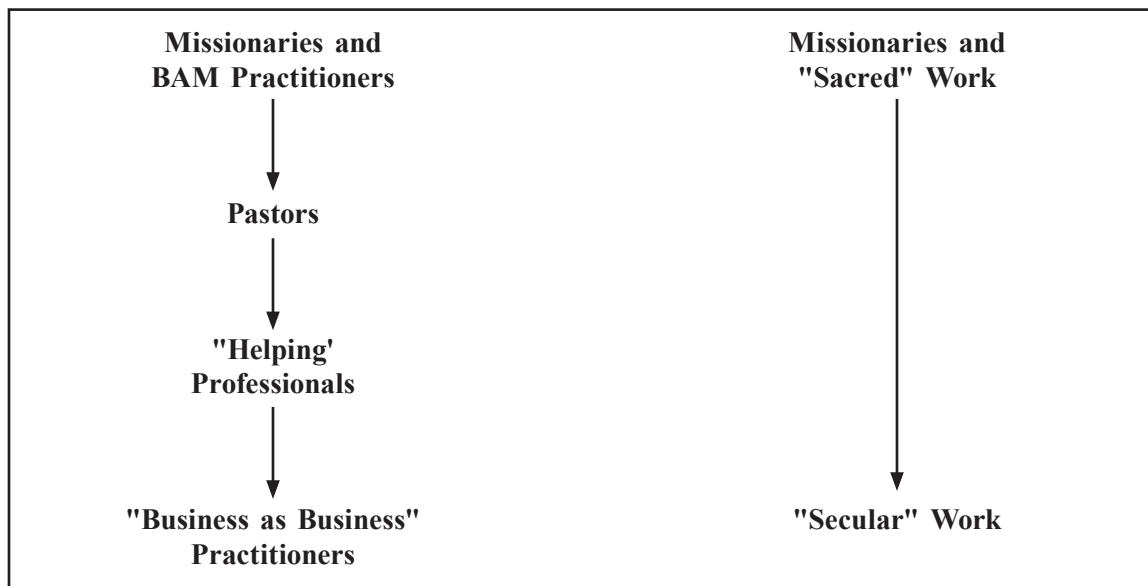
Business as Business is a Sacred Calling

The first and second proposed flaws of BAM (i.e., BAM is based on dualistic thinking and reinforces a dual-class citizenship among God's people in business) are quite ironic given the amount of time and energy expended by BAM enthusiasts directly advocating for the sacred

nature of business activity. To their credit, they strongly speak out against the false spiritual hierarchy that places full-time foreign missionaries (especially those called to third-world nation states) at the top of the hierarchy, and business

practitioners at the bottom. But the BAM conceptualization of business actually reinforces this false hierarchy such that BAM business work is positioned as sacred, and non-BAM business work as secular (see Figure 1 below).

Figure 1: The Implicit Spiritual Hierarchy of Work According to the BAM Movement



The conceptualization of a BAM business having evangelism, discipleship, and third-world economic/community development at the core of the purpose of the business is what explicitly reinforces this hierarchy. And the implicit message is that “business as business” is relegated to the bottom of the hierarchy once again.

From a Reformed perspective this is potentially very troubling. Put simply, I believe that all of God’s people image Him through their professional practice in business, regardless of whether the company for which they work intentionally evangelizes/disciples/develops the nations. That is, in all lawful business enterprise (with some exceptions dependent upon the product/service being provided) they are engaged in sacred activity, living out their sacred vocation.²

In fact, Christian business practitioners have before them the quite remarkable task of exercis-

ing dominion in the world. Thus, business professionals are afforded ultimate task significance in that through their work they image God and contribute to the upholding and on-going unfolding of His creation, and to the continued revelation of His kingdom, thereby loving Him with all their hearts, souls, and minds. In this vein, certainly the practice of business serves as a key conduit through which the needs of our neighbors are effectively met. For example, when people around the globe or around the corner are praying earnestly for their daily “bread,” the business professionals at Sara Lee, as well as at the local small-town bakery, are already hard at work baking, distributing, and retailing that “bread.” Clearly, this holds true for all legitimate needs (as indicated by placing the word bread in quotations), and ultimately involves meeting needs for many categories of neighbor, including consumers, em-

ployees, suppliers, shareholders, and members of the general communities in which businesses operate. Viewed in this light, business as business is clearly a sacred calling.

Business Is About Pursuing the Cultural Mandate and Extending Common Grace

The third proposed flaw, namely that BAM violates God's sovereign intent for his creation, can best be understood from the backdrop of sphere sovereignty. The concept of sphere sovereignty was codified by the Dutch Reformed theologian and statesman Abraham Kuyper, for whom Princeton University named and maintains today the Abraham Kuyper Center for Public Theology. The essence of Kuyper's seminal doctrine is that God intentionally orders creation with diversity and integrity such that each sphere of society is independently good, and must be appreciated as such. His work brings an interesting dynamic to the larger discussion of organizational hybridization, and whether such movements as BAM, social entrepreneurship, and even for-profit higher education are universally embraceable from the perspective of Christian worldview thinking. I herein suggest that embracing such movements without deep and broad thinking as to the larger impact on God's world, and His intended design for that world, is reckless at best and outright folly at worst.

The broad implication of Kuyper's thinking is that economic life, family life, civic life, school life, and even church life are distinct, and sovereign. The specific implication is that there are different God-ordained norms for each sphere such that a business must not be run like a church, or an educational institution must not be run like a governmental agency. This is *not* to say that God has not ordained universal norms that transcend all spheres (e.g., admonitions against the love of money, or the command to love your neighbor as yourself). But it *is* to say that some God-ordained norms are constrained to specific spheres (e.g., the command to care for the poor, or the command to evangelize the nations). Thus, God's people in business contexts must embrace

and live out God's good design for the sphere of business as opposed to His equally good design for the sphere of the church.

In this vein, it can be argued from the panoply of both special and general revelation³ that business is fundamentally about stewarding and prospering creation in line with the Cultural Mandate articulated in Genesis 1:28. This passage from the first chapter of Genesis declares that God's image bearers are to care for, subdue, rule over, and make fruitful, the earth. In short, as God's people in business we are charged with the task of prospering all that God has created. In doing so, God uses us to extend common grace⁴ to all people, meeting legitimate product/service needs and providing livelihood and generating wealth for many. That is, God equally shows His goodness to both His people and to the unredeemed through business activity. This is by God's design, and it represents His sovereign will for the business sphere of His creation. This is distinct from His design and sovereign will for the Church, where the principle mandate is the Great Commission articulated in Matthew 28. Here God's people are charged with evangelizing and discipling the nations, acting both individually and as the organized church. The obvious lesson here is that God intends for business and the Church to be separate, and yet complimentary spheres of His creation. It is a tricky endeavor indeed to merge the mandates imposed on these different components of God's creation.

Business Is About Stewarding Resources in Pursuit of Profit and Extending Shalom to All Stakeholders

The last two proposed flaws of BAM (i.e., that BAM undermines profit and is inauthentic relative to stakeholder engagement/interaction) are directly related to God's sovereign design for the sphere of business (as articulated above). In short, it appears from the perspective of general revelation (as conveyed by the history of capitalistic enterprise) that business is fundamentally designed to be a profit-making endeavor whereby shalom is extended to all business stakeholders.

That is, business must be profitable to be sustainable, and, when it is both, all stakeholders share in the shalom (peace and prosperity, with as much wholeness as is possible) engendered by the business.

Consider Chattem, an OTC pharmaceuticals and personal care products headquartered in Chattanooga, Tennessee just a few miles from my home. Many of the company's products are household staples, including Gold Bond lotion, Act mouthwash, and Icy Hot topical pain relievers. The company has provided stable employment for hundreds of employees, dependable revenue for thousands of suppliers and retailers, attractive returns for millions of investors, and quality products for hundreds of millions of consumers for over 130 years now. I happen to know that many of the employees at Chattem are professing/practicing Christians, and that there are even aspects of the company culture that are normatively "Christian."⁵ But I also know that this is not a BAM company. If it was, it would have intentionally interjected evangelism, discipleship, and third-world economic/community development into the corporate mandate. As such, I suspect would never have survived and thrived as long as it has. That said, I also know that two of the most senior executives of the firm strongly support and engage in domestic and world missions-related endeavors, but they do so through the church. They don't shirk the Great Commission at work, but they certainly don't interject it into their professional practice in ways that are inconsistent with their calling as God's stewards and agents of shalom in business. They don't engage in business activity with the underlying goal of proselytizing or discipling colleagues, or invest Chattem resources in parts of the world that don't offer a comparative advantage. This would undermine profit and disenfranchise stakeholders alike, which would be a lose-lose for the Kingdom, and for society as a whole.

BUSINESS IN THE CONSUMMATED KINGDOM?

In closing, I turn to the meta-narrative that is often employed to convey big-picture Reformed thinking about God, His people, and His creation. Doing so illumines and summarizes many of the key points proposed above.

Creation—God created all things good, including business. Business is part of God's good creation, and arguably His primary means for prospering creation and extending common grace to all people. Business is not a product of the fall.

Fall—All things have fallen from that original goodness, including business. Business has been infected by the fall. All the more reason that we desperately need God's people in business.

Redemption—Christ has redeemed all things, ushering in His kingdom and declaring again His original good design for all of creation, including business. Business is in a state of being transformed back to God's original good design. It is already redeemed, but doesn't yet fully reflect that reality. Again, all the more reason we desperately need God's people in business. That is, Christ is making all things new, including business, through His people.

Consummation—Christ will return again and fully consummate His kingdom. He will complete His work of making all things new, including business. We will live and reign with Christ for eternity in the new heaven and the new earth, as His people.

I don't pretend to know what it will be like to live in the new heaven and the new earth. But I increasingly dream that it will still involve business enterprise as a key means through which God showers His grace and extends His shalom to all of creation—but perfectly so. Ironically (relative to this discussion of BAM), if the new earth is the domain for our existence and we continue to have communal needs, there will be no need for BAM businesses at all. Just good old "business as business" enterprises will be needed.

ENDNOTES

1. NAPARC is the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council, which exists to celebrate and protect the orthodoxy of the Reformed faith. NAPARC requires member denominations to be in full commitment to the Bible in its entirety as the Word of God written, without error in all its parts, and to its teaching as set forth in the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, the Canons of Dort, the Westminster Confession of Faith, and the Westminster Larger and Shorter Catechisms. The systematic theology codified therein shapes and informs my worldview, and hence my personal response to BAM.

2. The Greek word for vocation used throughout the Bible is the word “klesis,” literally meaning “calling.” In general, this refers to the calling of the gospel. Thus, when the hearts of God’s people are regenerated and they respond in faith to the calling of the gospel, they become followers of Jesus Christ and accept as their vocation a life of devotion to Christian ideals and principles. When Jesus Christ was asked to share his teaching on the *essence* of *all* Christian ideals and principles he answered “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is just like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the law and the prophets hang on these two commandments.” (Matthew 22:37-40, NIV) Thus, vocation is ultimately all about loving God and neighbor, in part through our occupation. Therefore, all lawful occupations are equally sacred means through which God’s people live out their vocation in Christ.

3. Special revelation refers to the Bible as God’s inerrant and infallible word. General revelation refers to God’s continued revelation of himself through His creation. Related to this, the Reformed worldview would argue quite forcefully that “all truth is God’s truth,” (which is a commonly employed paraphrase of Calvin’s

thinking as broadly articulated in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*) and hence the truths of God are continually revealed in His creation, of which business is a critical component.

4. Common grace refers to the Reformed tenet that God causes His goodness and grace to fall upon all people equally in many ways related to living in secure, civil, prosperous society. For example, by providing low-cost, reliable, safe, and even “fun” commercial airline transportation, Southwest Airlines has equally improved the lives of the redeemed and the unredeemed alike. Hence, Southwest Airlines has been employed by God as an agent of common grace for over 38 years now.

5. I have worked regularly with Chattem on a consultancy basis since July of 2007. This considerable exposure to the company serves as the basis for my claims here. Among the normative “Christian” values at the core of Chattem’s culture are collaboration, intentionality, and egalitarianism.

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