

Business as Mission and the Planting of the Churches

By Larry Sharp



Cherie and Tom are Americans operating a manufacturing company in an Asian country which is considered “closed” or “limited access” by the missiologists. I have been in contact with them for twelve years, but they have been in country more than sixteen years, living in the community and operating the business. Cherie has the spiritual gift of evangelism and they both make friends easily and speak the language well.

Cherie reminded us of what God is doing in the life of a former employee, Rachel, a citizen of the country. Rachel had placed her faith in Christ as an employee and while on a trip into the interior God used her to start a Bible study.

Cherie had been mentoring Rachel and she continued to do so after Rachel moved to the interior town. She made regular visits for training, encouragement and accountability; and God started to bring a harvest. Cherie disciplined Rachel for four years and Tom and Cherie’s business helped to sustain her in planting house churches in the area. Today there are a total for four house churches, twenty-eight baptisms, with over three hundred coming to these churches. One member in this group of house churches has started a fifth house church in the north with nine in attendance.

This story is representative of what God is doing through his people working in Business as Mission (BAM) and is not an isolated one. It also represents many of the components that are important to the relationship between BAM and church planting.

Some Definitions

Although the concept goes back to the first century, BAM is a fairly new term originating in 1999. Mats Tunehag, perhaps the world’s premier BAM spokesman, indicates that a pure definition would suggest that Business as Mission is *Real Business*, which is viable, sustainable and profitable; and *Real Mission* with a Kingdom of God purpose, perspective, and impact which leads to the transformation of people and societies spiritually, economically, and socially—to the greater glory of God.¹ In short, BAM’s ultimate bottom line is to be an instrument of God’s *missio Dei* to the world.

The BAM Global Think Tank task force which included church planters as members uses this definition for church planting: “Church planting is that ministry which through evangelism and discipleship establishes reproducing Kingdom communities of believers in Jesus Christ who are committed to fulfilling biblical purposes under local spiritual leaders.”²

At the outset one might wonder what the issue is; why is this a topic of discussion? While it may seem overly simplistic, one might suggest that if an activity contributes to the making of disciples of Jesus, then it should be obvious that it has a part in planting churches. However, while affirming this, it is likewise unrealistic to portray the modern BAM movement as a mature means for making disciples and planting churches. It is not. There is much to be learned and much to be understood about practices which facilitate the growth of God's church through Business as Mission. Certainly, the twenty-first century manifestation of God at work building his church through the marketplace is not without precedent. And it is not without its controversy.

Issues Involved in the Relationship between BAM and Church Planting

There is a twentieth-century view that God calls a small subset of his people to make disciples and plant churches. I have talked to many business people who feel they have nothing to offer since they have been conditioned to look at the mission of God as something which has been outsourced to the professional minister and missionary. Imagine the story of Michelle, a successful

business owner who attended my graduate level class on *Business as Mission* who told me, "It never occurred to me that my business was my ministry..." How could this be for someone brought up in an evangelical church?

The church of the twentieth century greatly exacerbated this perspective with its focus on dispensational theology, Kingdom of God 'not yet' perspective, a focus on evangelistic rescue, polarization of social issues as distinct from fundamentalism, and by affirming the sacred-secular divide. Thankfully by the end of the century several voices had begun to recover evangelical thought, alternatively providing a kingdom theology focusing on the Kingdom of God 'here and now' being lived out in our lives, in addition to the 'not yet' (John Stott, R. Paul Stevens, Os Guinness, Dale Losch, Tim Keller, Darrow Miller).

Such aberration of the gospel suggests that *Missio Dei* requires a special call and training. Any challenge to the prevailing modality can be seen as taking an end-run around the system of outsourcing the missionary task to the agency. Numerous questions and reactions surface. Is BAM a different calling? Is it rooted in the church? Do BAMers have Bible and cross-cultural training? Where is the accountability? Is it a faith endeavor? Are they truly "sent ones?"

Unbiblical Perspectives on Work

Much has been written in the past ten years on a Theology of Work and Theology of Vocation (Guinness, 2003; Miller, 2009; Nelson, 2011; Eldred, 2005; Van Duzer, 2010; Keller, 2012). All of these and others dispute historic unbiblical perspectives on God's design for work such as a) work is a necessary evil and something to be endured; b) work is only a means to wealth, acquisition and power; c) work is all about self-actualization. Many believers still think along these lines and of course for those who do, it is unlikely that they will view their work as a place of ministry and mission. Change seems impossible.

English poet, Shelly suggests that "we are all Greeks" in that we inherited the gnostic view which provides a dualistic distinction between an imperfect material world and a spiritual one. There is hardly a serious author on BAM who has not acknowledged the sacred-secular divide as most detrimental to understanding how business persons are just as integral to disciple-making and church planting as are the professional clergy.

Martin Luther reminds us that our primary calling is to holiness and to Christ himself. In everyday work and profession our calling is to sanctification and service.

"Monastic vows rest on the false assumption that there is a special calling, a vocation, to which superior Christians are invited to observe the counsels of perfection while ordinary Christians fulfil only the commands; but there simply is no special religious vocation since the call of God comes to each at the common tasks." (Luther quoted in Stevens 1999, 75)

Such a view of calling gives everyday work a dignity and spiritual significance and is sourced in God being a God of work, giving man the task of working in the garden and beyond. Veith states "... the priesthood of believers did not make everyone into church workers, rather it turned every kind of work into a sacred

calling” (Veith 2011). Likewise, Stevens’ reference to the Hebrew words *abad* (work) and *shamar* (take care) in Genesis as also meaning service to God, worship and keeping his commandments implies no distinction between sacred and secular work (Stevens 2012, 11). He even suggests that profession is a choice, and what is important is ‘vocational holiness.’

View of the Role of Money

Even though we know that the scriptures clarify that money in and of itself is not evil (1 Timothy 6:10), evangelical Christians still oftentimes treat business people as greedy and money grabbing at worst; and at best are tolerated as a means to an end because they are expected to give more to the church. Jesus talked more about money than important topics like heaven and hell; warning us not to waste it; not to love it, not to trust it, and not expect it to satisfy (Luke 16). Grudem (2003, 47) states “... money is fundamentally good and provides opportunities for glorifying God, but also many temptations to sin.”

Oftentimes this view focuses on the abuses of profit and money which threaten to derail the fundamental good. There is a good and bad way to “engage in business until I come” (Luke 19:13) and in today’s world Jesus-followers who are responsible people of wealth follow the principles of God fleeing lusts, greed, poor stewardship, profiteering, and unrestrained capitalistic economics. Controversies ensue when one does not carefully isolate the abuses of something which God created as good, holy and useful. Wealth creation is clearly of God and from God as Deuteronomy 8:18 affirms.

Authenticity and Identity Confusion

Many mission agencies still think BAM might be a panacea for problems that they face, such as loss of visa or nationals who question their identity. BAM is often seen as a quick way to stay in the country with many pseudo businesses failing to focus on appropriate market studies; consumer needs, financial projections and other keys to authenticity. This type of behavior and lack of integrity which embodies a “means to an end” to church planting quite likely does more damage to the gospel and certainly lacks integrity.

Rick Love in addressing the dual identity issue of being a missionary in the homeland and a business person in the host country, argues for a core identity, which speaks of integrity and integration (Love 2011, 10). Core identity has its source in a person being trained in the scriptures *and* in the profession with an integrated view of work and ministry. Paul’s tentmaking was not a cover or a platform; his manual labor played a central role in the fulfillment of his mission.

How Kingdom Business People See Their Involvement in Planting God’s Church

BAM kingdom workers see their business as a place to interact with their employees, clients, customers, vendors, local government authorities, tax and law partners, etc. They are making disciples where life happens with disciples on both sides of the cross (Losch, 31). They see themselves on the front end of church planting, displaying the image of God in the workplace, obeying Jesus specific command to make disciples, the result of which is most assuredly local churches.

They see their work as worship and an expression of their sacred calling to live a holy life, serve others, and bring them to Jesus. Roberts articulates the biblical call to be witnesses and asserts that “Faith as a program is intrusive ... faith as a lifestyle and principles to live by is powerful and engaging ... we should start with Christology ... if you focus on mission, churches will follow, but if you focus on churches, mission often gets lost” (Roberts, 2007). Catho of Shalom University in the Congo affirms this with “make disciples first and it will result in kingdom communities of faith and love. Plant churches first and there is a danger of not only making followers of Jesus but also setting the church start up for failure.”

This model allows relationships to be fostered and potential disciples to see Christ-centeredness in real life, not in an artificial world. BAMer, B J affirms, “they get to see me in the good and the bad.” He goes on to define BAM as simply, “Living with God at work.” Billionaire Stephen Riady of the Lippo Group in Indonesia, “We know that the purpose of life is to know Christ...we want to glorify him, and the way to do

this is through our daily life, our experiences in family, in business and so on.” The net result is people will want to follow and churches are planted.

BAMers know that they live in a community and as they get involved with their neighbors, schools, clubs and stores, they make friends and all the while “live and love like Jesus.” Their business gives them credibility and a place in the community that others understand. Most live in housing developments similar to those around them.

One business owner in a “closed” country tells of joining the Chamber of Commerce as the only westerner and seeing how God opened up amazing doors for sharing the gospel. Another intentionally approached the city council in an effort to ask how he could create value for the city through his business, so they would be proud of him, all the while making it clear he was a “Jesus follower” and claiming Jesus to be the ‘boss’ of his company. No wonder several house churches have resulted from his influence in the community.

Another variance of BAM workers’ involvement with church planting is *team ministry*. They set up their business according to the gifts, training and experiences of management, seeing this as a stewardship issue. Oftentimes entrepreneurs or business owners are consumed with the business and while they live like Jesus and model a true disciple, they may need other workers for time-intensive disciple-making. In situations like this, a trained and experienced team member, oftentimes an agency person, will assume leadership in the spiritual bottom line issues. He or she will hold everyone accountable for mentoring others.

Many times, a simple organic church emerges from within the business, with accountability groups and worship times before or after work, with someone responsible to facilitate these until a true house church emerges. In the spirit of the organic church movement, every believer is a disciple-maker but certain people help maintain and encourage it.

Why are They Doing Business As Mission?

As I have traveled the world visiting BAM companies, I have often wondered why they do this—raise small children in Yemen, face the hardships of living in North Korea, cope with some of the most corrupt nations on earth, and daily face the potential of expulsion, persecution or worse.

I am convinced of several realities which daily drive them.

They understand and care about the Great Commission and are determined to be obedient; and they realize the Great Commandment to love our neighbor means job creation in a world of poverty, injustice and unemployment.

They understand their wiring and giftedness for business and see that as a gift from God to be used in accomplishing of *Missio Dei* in the world.

They want to go where the need is the greatest, meeting real needs as Jesus did, and doing it in a legitimate and integrous way.

They realize that the workplace is the most significant place for relationship building as they are with everyone all day for five or more days a week.

- They understand the age of missions as we know it may be coming to end due to cost factors and the fact that two thirds of the world’s population live in countries where missionary religious worker visas are not available.
- They realize most of North American Christians have not understood that all believers are to make disciples and do so intentionally; they see themselves as part of a modern re-inventing of the Reformation—taking the gospel and making disciples in the secular marketplace.

What Still Needs to be Understood, Clarified, and Improved?

To be sure there is much to do relative to the relationship between BAM and the planting of the church worldwide.

Most of us recognize the historical models represented in the book of Acts, and the Nestorians, Moravians, and William Carey among others; but *there is a lack of current models which are clear examples of BAM's role in making disciples*. Perhaps the closest example is *Great Commission Companies* (Rundle and Steffen, 2011). Many BAM companies, however are not comfortable with a full open reporting of all that God is doing in and through their business. This needs to be addressed.

One of the greatest needs is for *better measurements of spiritual outcomes* (Rundle 2012, 76) and an understanding of *legal and ethical issues* facing Christian cross-cultural business persons. Such immaturity in the BAM landscape leads to controversy, which creates a basic insecure ambivalence at best and an outright opposition at worst.

It would be helpful if the church would *consider this subject with a broader perspective* thinking of “Work as Mission” or “Life as Mission” or “All Professions as Mission,” taking the emphasis away from the word *business* and on to the idea of everywhere that life happens.

Accountability is still a gigantic issue as there are certainly plenty of Christian owned businesses in other cultures which were never missional or have lost the vision. Wise coaches and consultants insist on a *“ministry plan” integrated with the business plan*. An accountability board or church board must hold owners accountable for spiritual results such as mentoring relationships and subsequent house churches.

Many agencies still have the perspective that just about anyone can start and operate a business. Nothing is farther from the truth and agencies and churches in North America must *commission Godly Great Commission-oriented business persons for cross cultural business* for the glory of God.

Human and financial resources are vital to business and planting churches and the ironic thing is that our churches are filled with both. Issues remain as to how to help God's people take their profession to the ends of the earth and how to use financial resources to capitalize these startups. We have barely scratched the surface on this subject.

We in the west tend to think in a myopic manner toward subjects like this, but it is important to realize that probably *there are more non-western believers who operate BAM initiatives than western ones*. They are doing it for the same biblical reasons and it will be to our advantage to understand, study and partner with them. ☒

=== 000 ===

Larry W. Sharp is VP Emeritus at Crossworld and the founder of IBEC Ventures (www.ibecventures.com), a BAM consulting group. He travels and teaches on BAM themes and writes a weekly blog on the IBEC a site. Larry has degrees in Bible, business, and education (PhD), served in Brazil for twenty-one years, and currently lives in Seattle, WA. He and his wife of forty-nine years have four grown children and eight grandchildren.

Notes

1. BAM Think Tank Group, *“Business as Mission and Church Planting—Fruitful Practices for Establishing Faith Communities”* (January 2014), 1.
2. C. Ott, C. and G. Wilson, *Global Church Planting: Biblical Principles and Best Practices for Multiplication* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 8.