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**Revolution: Finding Vibrant Faith Beyond the Walls
of the Sanctuary**

Reviewed by Robb Redman

*George Barna. Revolution: Finding Vibrant Faith Beyond the
Walls of the Sanctuary, Tyndale House, Wheaton, 2005*

You say you want a revolution
Well, you know
We all want to change the world.
- John Lennon, Revolution

At the end of the movie *The Hunt for Red October* (McTiernan, 1990) the two heroes – the Russian sub captain played by Sean Connery and the CIA analyst played by Alec Baldwin – share a moment on the bridge of a Soviet nuclear ballistic missile submarine. The American comments about the likely turmoil in the Kremlin following the loss of the most advanced submarine ever built. The wise Russian smiles and says, “A little revolution now and then is a good thing, don’t you think?”

If a little revolution is a good thing, then what do we say about the sweeping changes in American Christianity taking place all around us? Only the most clueless observer of church life nationwide would conclude that nothing has changed in the past 25 to 30 years. Religious individualism and consumerism, first described by Robert Bellah and his associates in *Habits of the Heart* (1985) have emerged as powerful forces in American society. More Americans consider themselves spiritual, yet fewer attend services. People are interested in Jesus, but without Christianity. Worship leader Rich Kirkpatrick calls it “the iPod effect.” “It’s the impact of mass customization,” he said, “People program their own music and TV with iPod and Tivo. But the church can’t be all things to all people.”

George Barna’s brief and controversial book, *Revolution*, is

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one of several recent attempts to interpret this phenomenon. As he sees it, serious Christians – not just nominal ones—are leaving local churches. According to his calculations only a third of Christians will belong to local churches as we know them by 2025; as many as 30% of Christians will be connected to “alternative faith-based communities,” such as house churches, while another 30% will seek spiritual expression through media, the arts, and culture. This growing phenomenon of Christians without churches is the real “revolution,” as Barna sees it. These brave new disciples are forging new forms of worship, discipleship, witness and service that are generally disconnected from local churches.

Barna is remarkably positive about the future of the Church, the universal fellowship of believers. But local churches and denominational bureaucracies are another matter. Their inability to adapt to change will render them irrelevant. Barna doesn’t hide his disappointment with local churches very well. He’s been warning pastors and church leaders for the past two decades about adapting to a changing cultural setting, but they haven’t heeded his advice. Now churches are about to pay the price.

A Wake-Up Call

There’s some big problems with *Revolution* (we’ll come to them in a minute), but it does raise some points worth highlighting. Unfortunately, Barna paints with too broad a brush, lumping everybody together without acknowledging there are churches doing very well in some or all of these areas.

To begin with, *Revolution* states bluntly that the emperor has no clothes; it’s time for us to wake up to how our culture views us. Recent scandals and a widespread perception of hypocrisy and irrelevance make churches less attractive to non-believers as a resource for spiritual guidance. And more and more Christians are leaving churches, fed up with embarrassingly low levels of biblical and theological knowledge, weak worship, wafer-thin spirituality, timid evangelism, and little or no commitment to service in the community or the world.

Second, *Revolution* reminds us that a growing number of Christians are eager to engage popular culture rather than retreat from it. They not only enjoy movies and television, music, and the internet; they have ears to hear and eyes to see the spiritual issues to be found everywhere in our culture today. But they’re also tired of establishment Christians taking cheap shots at the entertainment industry and passing blanket judgment on the lifestyle choices of postmodern Americans. *Revolution* should spur us to think differently about contemporary culture and how

Christians can engage it, rather than attempt to insulate or isolate ourselves from it.

Third, *Revolution* reminds us that Christians are called to ministry in the world, not just in the church. Unfortunately, many churches offer too narrow a view of ministry, limiting it to activities held on the church property or in groups or activities directly accountable to staff and elders. Barna's book should prod us to think more broadly about ministry beyond the walls of the church; a growing number of serious Christians already do.

Finally, *Revolution* should be taken as a sobering reminder that we pastors and ministry leaders are failing to explain clearly the importance of community and its significance for biblically sound spiritual growth. We're good at promoting programs and recruiting people to help us do things we think are important. Yet a growing number of people – non-believers and Christians—see us pushing “churchianity,” not Christianity.

What's In a Word

Is “revolution” really the best way to describe what's going on? Barna isn't sure. Advertisers use “revolution” freely, sapping the word of its force. If everything is a “revolution,” then nothing is. So he takes us back to the dictionary definition of revolution as “radical and pervasive change.” Unfortunately, dictionary definitions only tell part of the story.

By viewing everything in terms of “revolution,” Barna has grabbed his sword by the blade. Why? Because *Barna chose a modern and secular concept to describe a spiritual phenomenon, rather than a biblical one.* In her book, *On Revolution* (1963), political philosopher Hannah Arendt pointed out: “The modern concept of revolution... was unknown prior to the two great revolutions at the end of the eighteenth century.” The word “revolution” came from physics and described the rotation of an object. Political thinkers enamored with the French Revolution were drawn to two features of “revolution.” To begin with, they liked its connotation of inevitable and irresistible change. In essence, “revolution” is an historical force—a secularized providence—that shapes events and people. Barna reflects this when he portrays the Revolution as an inevitable and irresistible social and cultural force without clearly explaining its relationship to God. But from a biblical perspective, there are no historical forces independent of the sovereignty of God.

Again, “revolution” means a clean break with the past and the introduction of something completely new. Arendt wrote: “The modern concept of revolution [is] inextricably bound up



with the notion that the course of history suddenly begins anew, that an entirely new story, a story never known or told before, is about to unfold..." "Revolution" focuses exclusively on *discontinuity* with the past. The Bible's view of history is different, emphasizing a balance of continuity and discontinuity within the larger framework of God's sovereign plans. Thus Jesus is not revolutionary in the modern sense of the word, though his coming introduced "radical and pervasive change." Why not? Because the life and ministry of Jesus stands in a deeper continuity with the Old Testament; he fulfills the covenant promises of God to his people and the many signs in the Old Testament that point to his coming.

Historically, Christians have been more comfortable with the terms *renewal* and *revival* to describe "radical and pervasive change," rather than revolution, because they point to the providential hand of God, rather than impersonal forces of history. Those of us who have been around long enough know that the Church in every generation has its "Revolutionaries" who are disillusioned with the local church and yearn for something more. In the 1940s and 50s, it was thoughtful critics like C.S. Lewis, Carl Henry and A.W. Tozer, and entrepreneurs like Charles E. Fuller, Billy Graham, Bill Bright, and Bob Pierce. In the 1960s it was the charismatic movement, and the lay renewal movement led by prophets like Keith Miller at Laity Lodge and Bruce Larson at Faith at Work. In the 1970s it was the Jesus movement spearheaded by Chuck Smith at Calvary Chapel, Costa Mesa. In the 1980s and 1990s it was John Wimber and the Vineyard. Today it is the adventurous Christianity found in the writings of Brian McLaren, Donald Miller, Erwin McManus, Rob Bell, and a host of bloggers. And so it goes. Not a revolution, but a rhythm of renewal and revival in response to the movement of the Holy Spirit among and within ordinary communities of faith.

What About Community?

Much of the debate unleashed by *Revolution* centers on Barna's negative assessment of the local church. Yet lurking behind this evaluation is a deeper problem with Barna's book, namely, its deafening silence on the subject of community. Community does not appear among the "spiritual passions" of "Revolutionaries" in their attempt to recapture biblical Christianity. There is the Church, the universal fellowship of believers, and there are Christians who connect in "spiritual relationships," in "mini-

movements,” and in families. But community as described in the Bible is curiously and lamentably absent.

Barna is right when he says “...the Bible neither describes nor promotes the local church as we know it today.” *But it does promote a local church of some kind.* Biblical community involves a wee bit more than “spiritual friendships.” Paul’s letters, particularly the pastoral letters, point to a pretty structured organization. The gospels, particularly Matthew and Luke/Acts, also reflect local church concerns.

The New Testament doesn’t gloss over life in community. These new faith communities were far from perfect; in fact they were often messy and difficult. But Paul addressed the Corinthian church as the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:27) while at the same time he dressed them down for behavior that would make the front page of the *National Enquirer* today. If anybody had a reason to be down on the local church, it would be Paul. Yet he viewed the confusing mix of saints and sinners as evidence of God’s sovereignty. “We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us” (2 Corinthians 4:7 NIV).

What kept these saint/sinner communities together despite everything threatening to pull them apart? As Robert Banks observes in *Paul’s Idea of Community* (1994) the dynamic force behind NT community was the Gospel, the Word of God. Christian community is more than just a voluntary association of like-minded believers, it was spiritual fellowship gathered and sustained by the Holy Spirit through the preaching of the gospel. Hughes Old points out that the first Christians early on adopted many features of the Jewish synagogue service in their worship, most importantly the regular reading and preaching of scripture. *The Word of God gathers and sustains biblical community.*

Some historical perspective also helps. Barna and his “Revolutionaries” are impatient with the weaknesses and shortcomings of the local church. That’s fine; there’s nothing wrong with it. In fact, they can join the crowd. Serious Christians have had similar complaints for nearly 2000 years. *The history of Christianity is a history of creative tension between the spiritually bold and adventurous on the one hand, and the more cautious and complacent on the other.* The late Wes Seeliger called it the difference between “pioneers” and “settlers,” each with their own theologies and views of the Christian life. For centuries, “pioneers” in the Roman Catholic tradition gravitated toward the monastic, preaching and missionary orders. Among Protestants, “pioneers” helped start renewal movements and new denominations, opened mission fields, planted new churches and launched

parachurch ministries.

Local churches need pioneers to stretch our faith and keep us from becoming too complacent, too “settled.” They must be cherished and celebrated in community, and not constrained with “least common denominator” Christianity. Today’s “pioneers” are reinventing spiritual disciplines for a new age, particularly in the marketplace and on the internet. There is little that’s “revolutionary” in this; there have been men and women doing the same thing in every generation since the apostles. And there are plenty of pioneers in local churches, apparently below Barna’s radar.

But it works both ways. “Pioneers” need local faith communities beyond just a handful of “spiritual relationships,” be they house churches, or small groups in traditional churches. It is true, with community comes accountability, but the history of Christianity is littered with revival and renewal movements that neglected the habits and disciplines of community. Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s warning from *Life Together* (1954) is timely: “Let him who cannot be in community beware of being alone.” The creative passion and energy of today’s “pioneers” is too valuable to lose with misguided labels and advice.

Reviewer

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