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## Book Review: Revolution: Finding Vibrant Faith Beyond the Walls of the Sanctuary

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

**Reviewed by Bob Wenz**

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

In *Hunt for Red October*, the whole Soviet navy is deployed in the north Atlantic to look for a missing Soviet submarine. The observation of the U.S. intelligence services is that sailing at full speed, the hunters would be going too fast for active sonar to detect even “a stereo system playing rock music full blast.” In the introduction to *Revolution*, George Barna promised a “quick read.” He delivered on that promise. However, it was as if he wrote *Revolution* intentionally so that readers, like the Soviet navy at flank speed, would sail through it quickly. Then they might not hear the blaring noise in the headphones and stop to ask questions.

He promised that the book would either encourage me or make me angry. It did not do either. Instead, three words come to mind: befuddled, betrayed, and besmirched.

First, I’m *befuddled* by George Barna. Isn’t this the face that launched a thousand megachurches; and, did he really grasp what he was saying? George was the Pied Piper of the church growth movement -- and we paid him very well in the coin of the realm. A whole generation of baby boomers bought and read every word of nearly three dozen insightful books based on his research. Bill Hybels, Mr. Megachurch himself, acknowledged he anticipated and read every word George wrote for his books and later website. As a generation, we took George’s words to be right up there with the Word, and some even put George’s truth on a par with God’s truth. Many churches were structured or restructured, positioned or repositioned, staffed or re-staffed

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according to what George told us about the demographics of our communities and the cultural frogs in the kettle. As a result, it is bewildering to watch the Pied Piper attempt to now lead out from the church some of the same American believers who he help lead into the church a generation ago. George, is it really you?

I am bewildered by some of the data presented. For years George Barna has pointed to his data that less than 10% of those claiming to be Born Again Christians have a biblical world view. His message was that clear enough—less than 4 million of 40 million born again Christians give evidence of having been truly converted. The rest, according to Barna's research, demonstrate lifestyles that do not differ significantly from the un-churched population. As George unpacked his data, we listened and were alarmed -- knowing that there was solid evidence behind the summary statements on his website. Perhaps there are not really 40 to 60 million evangelical Christians in the U.S. (a tally often cited in the media).

Now, by George, we learn that there are actually 20 million Christians who have been truly converted -- and who (having become *fully devoted followers* of Jesus Christ) have now outgrown the congregationally formatted church and joined the revolution. They have left the institutional conventionally-formatted church and become part of the Church. These 20 million superior Christians have all realized that the church of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century was actually an old wine skin and needs to be replaced by hundreds of thousands of house churches.

Who should know better that the numbers don't quite work than Dr. Barna. It is difficult not to recall the old adage that if you torture the numbers enough, you can make them say anything. So, this appears the first glaring contradiction that might be easy to pass over. For this migration of 20 million Christians to have happened and continue to grow, Barna would have us believe that *all* of the evangelicals with a biblical world view (the 10% of 40 million), joined by 16 million other deeply devoted Christians constitute his revolution. If so, where did the other 16 million come from? It would appear from the Barna Group website data that if a person attends a small group while attending a conventional church as well, they are numbered among the revolution. This is misleading. I am one of those who, like many, is part of a small group under the auspices of a conventional church. No one in my home group/cell group considers this as a half-way house for the transition out of the church. In fact, most conventional church leaders would earnestly desire that 100% of their congregations would participate in a small group of this

kind. Could it be that most of what George Barna is tracking is merely a very welcome spike in small group participation?

And if there are 20 million house churches in the United States in perhaps 1 million locations, where are they? If there were 1 million house churches (with an average size of 20) I think we all would have noticed by now. The internet sites for house churches yield a significant number [several hundred], but only a small fraction of the house churches needed [tens or hundreds of thousands] to account for all those claimed by the revolutionaries.

No doubt, church attendance in the United States, sadly, is down in the past twenty-five years as a percentage of the population. Yet, Mr. Data offers almost no data in the book itself to support his primary assertions. In fact, the only *documented* revolutionaries in the book are two men who play golf on Sunday with pagan neighbors [we used to say “unchurched,” but *Revolution* would certainly question the use of that term] and Barna himself. [To be fair, the Barna website offers the supporting data, so the book is more of personal appeal based on George Barna’s credibility.] Moreover, if all this were all true, could there be any true evangelical Christians left in any of our churches? Barna must believe there are at least some, otherwise why bother with his encouragement to these superior saints to get with it, join the revolution, and leave the church, too.

So, I’m befuddled trying to square the reality I see either with Barna’s *Revolution*-ary claims or with the data from the Oracle of Ventura. I must admit, however, that I am not bewildered by George Barna’s critique of the local congregationally-formatted church. I have pastored four of those over 25 years, and I think that many of the criticisms of Barna are valid. I remember pastoring a fairly large church in California where we had to nominate 180 different people to serve on committees each year. We soon discovered that many people were eager to serve on a committee because they believed that a church committee was the epitome of serving God. Actually, it was only a safe place in a bureaucracy to mimic serving God without ever having to have contact with a non-Christian.

Clearly, the church has been infected with the models of leadership and values of corporate America; it has been inundated with vision statements that had little to do with true discipleship; and, genuine community is fairly rare. It is not a surprise, then, that George Barna would have more reasons than most people to sour on the 20<sup>th</sup> century church having studied it so closely for so long. But with all its warts and freckles, it is still the bride of Christ, still loved by him as well as some of us seri-

ous Christian-worldview holders. Barna's distinction between the American church that is so badly flawed and the Church to which he and millions of others is fleeing is artificial at best and condescending at worst. One hundred tired old saints in an old cathedral singing *The Old One Hundredth*, or ten thousand young saints in a warehouse megachurch are no less the Church (or at least true part of it) than those gathered in the idealized house church that Barna belongs to and invites us all to discover.

As a result of all this, I am also feeling *betrayed*. George Barna has done a great service to the church for the past 25 years. His data and his studied extrapolations have been helpful to a whole generation of church leaders. We didn't always like his data. We didn't always know what to do with his data. Yet, we always felt that as leaders we were better enabled by George Barna to perform at a higher level the first responsibility of leadership—to define and describe reality for our organizations. Now it has all been tarnished at best and tainted at worst. I feel like the young boy in Chicago who, when the Black Sox were banned from baseball for throwing the World Series, said to Shoeless Joe Jackson: "Say it ain't so, Joe!"

I expect that this sense of betrayal will also be felt by thousand of men and women who are the career professionals in the church—those who (like myself) invested years in Bible colleges and seminaries learning to "rightly divide the word of truth" so that they could teach it and preach it with clarity, with integrity, and with accuracy. George Barna encouraged us to be relevant, creative, and helped us to more effectively to fulfill our calling. The new message is as disturbing as it is dangerous: The simple church [house church] revolution doesn't need you or want you. We will teach the Bible ourselves. Perhaps the superior Christians in the house church can teach the Bible effectively, but will we not lose our exegetical, hermeneutical, and theological guard rails in the process? This is especially true of the dangerous methodology of the small group: let's all sit in a circle, read the passage, and have each person share what it means to them. It is little wonder that one of the new house church websites linked to Barna's website touts: "Planting Churches without Bible College." Keeping evangelicalism within the stream of historic orthodoxy is difficult enough already. Will there be any orthodoxy left to measure when seminary trained pastors and some means of accountability are completely obliterated from the body of Christ in the sacred name of "shared leadership?"

Lastly, I am afraid that George Barna will be *besmirched* by *Revolution*. Having read Barna's books over the past twenty-five years I believed George, more than most, "got it." He under-

stood the modern American church as well—if not better—than anyone. Maybe *too* well. With *Revolution*, George risks alienating almost his entire constituency with a flash flood wiping out all his bridges of credibility. The megachurch buys books—and bought many copies of Barna’s books in the past—but, it is unlikely that the megachurch will buy this one or perhaps anything George will write in the future.

Given his level of disenchantment with the local congregationally-formatted church, it may be difficult for George Barna to comprehend that some of us love and value the church. Yes, there is a great deal wrong and a great deal lacking with the church. I could write a book about it. In fact, I did. Yet, many of us still find it to be a place of [1] meaningful corporate worship, a place for [2] biblical preaching and teaching rooted in the ground of historic orthodoxy, [3] a worthwhile vehicle for large scale joint ministries such as (but not limited to) missions, and [4] a place for meaningful community for those who will make the effort. And while the house church may be a safe entry point to the Kingdom for some, the conventional church is still a safe entry point for still others because [5] it can be anonymous. The disdain for the conventional church is reminiscent of the home school movement and the denim jumper Nazi’s of a generation ago who were so convinced of the superiority of home schooling that they could not even acknowledge some of the benefits of conventional [secular or Christian] schooling option—real science labs, marching bands, competitive sports, a diverse social structure, or the senior prom. Sour grapes?

Even with all its substantial ineptness, the evangelical church in the U.S. has demonstrated at least a willingness and some ability for innovation over the past 50 years as revealed by the church growth movement and how much Barna data it has devoured in the process. Yes, the American church has always been a generation behind the culture, just as George told us. However, in its 2000-year history, the church has never had to cope with such massive social and cultural change as we have seen since the end of World War II. Now, even with its glaring theological questions still to be wrestled to the ground, the emergent church movement is at least another attempt to innovate the church for the post-modern culture albeit with uneven methodologies and results. Certainly the house church is a valid alternative to the conventional church for the 21<sup>st</sup> century (as it has been through the cell group movement in other countries for thirty years), but does one size really fit all? It would be great to see 70 million Americans in house churches in 20 years, but what do we really gain by emptying conventional churches in the

process? Yet, I suspect that Barna would delight in that prospect even though I cannot understand why this is so.

Perhaps we should read the datum this way. Once upon a time, a long-term student of church demographics has become convinced that the church is now beyond help—perhaps even the help of the Holy Spirit. He gave up on the church. He abandoned the church. He left and he rejoices that he has found a very viable alternative in the house church.

It need not be either/or, but he makes it “either/or” when he pronounces the house church or simple church to be The True Church. Perhaps that makes him feel better, even justified, about leaving. One might even be tempted to feel superior to those left behind in the megachurch. But it is lonely world out there—picture Don Quixote and his imagined windmills—and it appears that the Man of Ventura is tilting at steeples. Perhaps he *wants* the numbers to be bigger than they are to justify his leaving. In the same way, then, he *hopes* others will join him in his revolution outside the walls to confirm his own personal conclusion that the conventional church is beyond recovery.

If all this is true, then why do we not call college drop-outs “revolutionaries,” celebrate their departure, and encourage others to join the exodus—all because in their great wisdom they gave up on the institutional education option. After all, Bill Gates dropped out of Harvard and “proved” once and for all that the traditional institutions of higher education are fatally flawed and only serve to stifle the superior people. Would Bill and Melinda Gates now deny their children the option of gaining a conventional education just because Bill dropped out? So why does George Barna want to be the Pied Piper and lead me out of the church?

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Reviewer

Wenz, Robert. Address: 9946 Red Sage Drive, Colorado Springs, CO 80920. Email: *drbobwenz@hotmail.com*. Dr. Wenz received a B.A. and an M.A. degree in Speech Communication [1971 and 1973] from Arizona State University, an M.A.R. degree from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School [1976] and a D. Min. from Bethel Theological Seminary [1990]. Following twenty-five years of pastoral ministry in Michigan, New York, Los Angeles and Washington D.C., he served for three years as Vice President of National Ministries for the National Association of Evangelicals. Currently he teaches part-time at both the King's College and Seminary and Pikes Peak College [Colorado Springs] and is working to develop Total Worship, a worship and preaching ministry of coaching and teaching for congregations and pastors. He is the author of *Room for God? A Worship Challenge for the Church Growth and Marketing Era* [Baker Book] and a regular contributor to *Christianity Today*.