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

Reviewed by Greg Gilbert

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

George Barna is without doubt one of the most quoted people in the Christian community today, mostly for his statistics about how astonishingly large numbers of Christians neither believe nor live as the Bible says they should. Apparently, Barna has simply gotten fed up with it all, because his latest offering, a thin little volume entitled *Revolution*, simply declares that it's time to start over. The local church has had its chance, he says, it failed, and so it's time to move on to something new.

Now that's definitely a revolutionary statement, and given the mountains of books that have been written about the local church—its marks, aims, nature, and responsibilities—one would think it might take slightly more than 140 highly-graphicked, highly-white-spaced pages to bring all that down. But not for George Barna. Not for a marketer. No, George Barna, Founder and Directing Leader of The Barna Group, manages to sweep away 2000 years of church history and theological reasoning with a single coffee-table gift book.

Barna's Argument

His argument is simple, straightforward, and not a little sophomoric: American Christianity is being overtaken by an unstoppable, world-swallowing Revolution which will change life as we know it and redefine the meaning of Christian ministry—forever! Okay, perhaps that's a bit overwrought. Here's how Barna himself puts it: "It is about an explosion of spiritual energy and activity we are calling the Revolution—an unprecedented

reengineering of America's faith dimension that is likely to be the most significant transition in the religious landscape that you will ever experience" (viii). Yes, much better. Much more measured. Obviously not a sucker for understatement, Barna declares breathlessly that "[The Revolution] is on track to become the most significant recalibration of the American Christian body in more than a century" (viii-ix). Here's another one: "The Revolution is bursting open the walls of the worldwide Church to birth a truly international network of relationships. The synergies resulting from this expanded horizon will be impossible to quantify—or contain" (106). This Revolution is "gathering momentum," introducing "sweeping changes," "reshaping our society," has "unleashed a massive shift," and is "the most significant transition you or I will experience during our lifetime" (41, 49).

Yet after all that high powered language, Barna can still say with a straight face, "We live in an era of hyperbole. . . . Hmm, does that sound as if I'm the one who is now guilty of hyperbole? I don't think so" (10-11).

But if Barna's Revolution is really more than so much empty verbiage, what is it? And where is it? Barna would like to define his Revolutionaries as a group of Christians who embody all the best virtues, passions, and characteristics of biblical Christianity, and he would like to argue that the local church really has little or nothing to do with it. The book opens with a fictional story about David and Michael, both of whom have rejected the local church from their lives, "driven out . . . by boredom and the inability to serve" (2). The difference between the two men is that while Michael lost most of his interest in spiritual things, David "decided to develop his own regimen of spiritual practices and activities in order to retain a vibrant spiritual life" (2). In Barna's mind, David is the fictionalized epitome of a Revolutionary. "His life," Barna says, "reflects the very ideals and principles that characterized the life of Jesus Christ and that advance the kingdom of God—despite the fact that David rarely attends church services" (7).

Further defining his Revolutionaries, Barna says they are characterized by seven passions, which almost anyone would see as praiseworthy: intimate worship, faith-based conversations, intentional spiritual growth, servanthood, resource investment, spiritual friendships, and family faith. Armed with these passions, the Revolutionaries—well over 20 million strong (13)—"are confidently returning to a first-century lifestyle based on faith, goodness, love, generosity, kindness, simplicity, and other values deemed 'quaint' by today's frenetic and morally untethered standards" (12).

Of course, no one would argue with Christians who are driven by such passions. But the inflammatory element in Barna's book is that he declares the local church to be essentially irrelevant to developing, sustaining, or multiplying that kind of Christian conviction. In fact, his own investigation tells him that the local church has been a spectacular failure. Drawing on his own years of research, Barna uses chapter 4 to show that, far from producing Christians who are passionate followers of Christ, "most churched Christians [are] immature and desperate" (30). Churched believers do not attend worship services, they do not evangelize, they do not have a biblical worldview, and on and on.

Yet even in the face of all this, it's not that Barna wants local churches to be closed down immediately, and he does not argue for people to reject them. "There is nothing inherently wrong with being in a local church," he says (36). Among his own Revolutionaries, in fact, "Some of them are aligned with a congregational church, but many of them are not" (8). Essentially, Barna argues, the church is a "take-it-or-leave-it" matter. Being involved in a local church has nothing fundamental to do with living faithfully as a Christian.

Two Important Questions

It's tempting to give Barna some credit for "having his finger on a problem" with the local church. But the more I think about it, I'm not sure how difficult or courageous it is to point out that the church is not everything God intends it to be. Occasionally, someone will come along and point out a serious, well-defined, and well-analyzed problem with the church. David Wells, for instance, has written a series of books which do just that. But there's nothing particularly insightful in Barna's diagnosis. How much credit do you get, really, for pointing at the church and saying, "Not passionate enough! Not committed enough! Not good enough!"? There's no depth there, no substance, no serious thought. Real insight does not consist in pointing out problems that are obvious to everyone. To get credit for insightful commentary, you either have to do some serious analysis on a serious problem, or you have to offer some solutions. Barna doesn't come close to doing the former, and when it comes to the latter, his proposed solution amounts to the not-super-helpful suggestion that we simply chuck it all in the trash.

It doesn't seem to me that jettisoning the local church is the way to address its problems, especially since the whole thing was ordained by Jesus Christ in the first place. I'll return to that thought in a moment, but first, let me raise what I think are a

couple of highly relevant questions.

First, if this Revolution is so sweeping, so unstoppable, so nationwide, where is it? Barna says there are 20 million people involved, but he never interviews a single person who would identify with his Revolution. In fact, the closest he gets to that is making up his golf-course Revolutionary, David. If there were anything really happening worthy of the super-heated language Barna uses throughout this book, it should not have been too hard for him to find at least one or two Revolutionaries to interview for it. Nor should it have been too hard to come up with some real statistics about where these people are, and how many of them have really abandoned the church. But there is no such research here. In fact, one gets the impression that Barna has simply invented a character called a Revolutionary, made breathless statements about what he thinks a Revolutionary ought to look like, declared them to be a movement some 20-million-strong, and then prevailed upon others to “join” their fictional ranks. In other words, Barna isn’t really researching or uncovering anything with this book. He is doing what any good marketer would do: trying to drum up interest in his idea by declaring that millions, millions, millions! have already seen the light. Barna is not exposing a revolution; he is trying desperately to create one.

Second, it seems to me that Barna is doing nothing more interesting than declaring that his Revolutionaries are all the best Christians. They’re the ones who love Jesus more than anything, strive to live according to his example, are simple, loving, servant-minded, good, and passionate about their faith. Moreover, it doesn’t matter whether they’re involved in a church or not. If you’re a great Christian—church or no church—then you’re a Barna-Revolutionary. As Barna himself admits, “Revolutionaries, almost by definition, are zealous and passionate about obeying God’s Word and honoring him” (117).

But if that’s the case, then isn’t it a bit tendentious for Barna to claim all the best Christians as Revolutionaries (including those in the church), and then compare those best Christians to the rest of the church? Here’s an example of that kind of slanted analysis: “As seen in earlier chapters regarding the state of the Church in America these days, Christians who are involved in local churches are actually less likely than Revolutionaries to lead a biblical lifestyle” (115). Well, of course they are! Because you’re comparing everyone who regularly darkens the door of a church to Christians who are by definition zealous and passionate about obeying God’s Word and honoring him. I fail to see exactly how that qualifies as a helpful or insightful comparison.

Is The Church Really Expendable?

But it is not just Barna's silly hyperbole and faulty "analysis" that undermines his book. It is his monstrously unbiblical conclusion that the church is expendable, along with the almost limitless arrogance he encourages in anyone who decides to declare himself a Revolutionary.

Barna's case for the expendability of the local church seems to rest on the assertion that the Bible doesn't describe church the way we do it now, and therefore, that God cares more about our hearts and lives than he does about whether we go to church. Take this paragraph, for example:

We must also address one other reality: the Bible never describes "church" the way we have configured it. The Bible goes to great lengths to teach us principles for living and theology for understanding. However, it provides very little guidance in terms of the methods and structures we must use to make those principles and insights prevail in our lives. It seems that God really doesn't care how we honor and serve Him, as long as He is number one in our lives and our practices are consistent with His parameters. (115-116)

No one will deny that there's a measure of truth in at least part of this. The Bible doesn't give us very many specific parameters for how to structure church. But Barna's idea that we should all just trade in the idea of a congregational gathering for mini-movements like homeschools, fellowships, "various marketplace ministries," "several spiritual disciplines networks," or "Christian creative arts guilds" is nonsense (54). How many homeschools do you know that fulfill the marks of a true church as the Bible lays them out—right preaching of the Word, right administration of the sacraments, right practice of discipline? How many "spiritual disciplines networks" or "creative arts guilds"? All those groups are fine, and maybe even good, but they are a poor substitute for the kind of biblical church assembly that the author of Hebrews warns Christians not to neglect (Hebrews 10:25).

Of course, Barna recognizes the enormous objection that passage deals to his case, so he says of it, "Such interaction could be in a worship service or at Starbucks; it might be satisfied through a Sunday school class or a dinner in a fellow believer's home" (114). No, it couldn't. The author of Hebrews does not have in mind a one-on-one meeting between two Hebrew Christians at the local coffee shop; he is not just talking about a meaningful conversation with a group of Christians. He is talking about a

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about a gathering of believers where there are leaders and teachers, where the Word of God is preached, where the ordinances administered, and where believers are formally held accountable by the church. The “assembling of ourselves together” in Hebrews 10 might not have looked exactly like one of our modern-day churches, but it certainly wasn’t dinner in a fellow believer’s home or a serious chat on the golf course between swings. For Barna to insist otherwise is either to betray a lamentable ignorance of both the New Testament and Christian history, or it is to engage in a classic example of *ex post facto*, cover-my-tail exegesis.

Then there’s this memorable line: “Not once did he [the apostle Paul] rant about being present at church every week or completing specified amounts of activity” (95). Rant! Leave aside the face-saving, straw-man phrase “or completing specified amounts of activity,” to which no evangelical Christian would subscribe. Was Paul ranting about the church when he spent four chapters of 1 Corinthians (11-14) telling those people how they were to act when they gathered together? Was he ranting when he chastised the Corinthians for having divisions “when you come together as a church?” Was he ranting when he talked to them about eating the Lord’s Supper “when you come together?” How about when he talked about them all speaking in tongues “when the whole church comes together,” or when he encouraged them all to bring a hymn or other word “when you come together?” Maybe Paul didn’t rant about being present at church every week, as Barna so carefully puts it, but he certainly seems to have held the gathering of the congregation in higher esteem than Barna does.

As for Barna’s assertion that God cares more about our hearts than our churches, it’s hard to argue against a bromide like that (see 115-116 for an example). But it’s also hard to imagine a statement with less sophistication or perspective. Couldn’t God care about both our hearts and whether we are involved in a local church? Couldn’t it be, in fact, that the local church is the way God shapes our hearts to conform with His Word? Clearly, the Bible has much to say about both an individual Christian’s heart, and about the church. For Barna to declare one more important than the other—and what’s more, to call for the abandonment of the one he sees as less important—is reasoning unworthy of a book that desires to be taken seriously.

One final thing. Barna’s book is shot through with a macho hubris that ought to turn the stomach of any serious Christian. What sort of Christianity is it that advises people to have “a disregard for the criticisms of those who lack the same dedication to

the cause of Christ"? (27) Does Barna really want people declaring themselves to be better Christians than everyone else—remember, that's what Revolutionaries are—and then declaring their pastors to be spiritually inferior as soon as they question them for abandoning the church? A healthy recipe, that! My guess is every pastor knows at least one person who fits that description, and that the general impression of such people is something less than "sold-out revolutionary for the cause of Christ."

It's hard to avoid the impression that George Barna wrote this book out of sheer frustration with his own experience. If he had ever been a part of a healthy, vibrant local church, he wouldn't find it so easy to declare the local church expendable. One only wishes that before he published this book, he had found a church where the Word of God is faithfully preached, where relationships are strong, where non-believers are coming to Christ, and where believers are being strengthened and built up in the faith. I, along with thousands of other Christians around the country, could easily have pointed him in the right direction. Sadly, he didn't find such a church, and so now we are all privy to George Barna's personal frustrations in the form of a careless little book that large numbers of people will no doubt take very seriously.

Reviewer

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