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A Revolution in the Making?

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So there. Of course, from the very onset some may question the earth-shaking significance of a "revolution" announced in a 140-page book, no matter how shocking its cover and publicity. Of course, *The Communist Manifesto* was a short treatise as well, but this hardly seems a fair comparison.

When George Barna talks about the revolution he perceives, he speaks about "an explosion of spiritual energy and activity" that is "likely to be the most significant transition in the religious landscape that you will ever experience." He begins his manifesto by illustrating his "revolution" by means of a conversation between David and Michael, two representative postmoderns. Both of these men, depicted as playing golf on Sunday morning rather than going to church, are described as having been "driven out of their longtime church by boredom and the inability to serve in ways to make use of their considerable skills and knowledge." Beyond this, their response took the shape of two very different trajectories. David "decided to develop his own regimen of spiritual practices and activities in order to retain a vibrant spiritual life." Michael, on the other hand, "chose to call a truce with God and simply get on with life, sans church." As Barna describes them, both think of themselves as "deeply spiritual" persons. Beyond this, both affirm the truth and reliability of the Bible and pray before meals. Both complain of being chastised by pastors for their failure to be involved in the local church.

Of the two, David represents Barna's "Revolutionary Christian." As such, he is "not willing to play religious games" and has little interest "in being a part of a religious community that is not intentionally and aggressively advancing God's Kingdom."

As Barna acknowledges, "We live in an era of hyperbole." Evidently, he has decided to join in hyperbolic expression. He acknowledges that the very idea of revolution is one that has attracted the attention of marketers. He identifies the Revolutionaries as a group of relatively young adults, now numbering over two hundred million persons. They are frustrated with local church life, have grown to distrust ministry leaders, and are determined to do more than "go with the flow" of contemporary evangelicalism.

And who wouldn't want what Barna's Revolutionaries desire? "They are seeking a faith experience that is more robust and awe inspiring, a spiritual journey that prioritizes transformation at every turn, something worthy of the Creator whom their faith reflects. They are seeking the spark provided by a commitment to true revolution and thinking, behavior, and experience, where settling for what is merely good and above average is defeat."

These high-demand Christians represent a threat to the established church. With an amazing lack of nuance, Barna consistently presents his Revolutionaries in a positive light and the local church in a negative light. When Revolutionaries are criticized by established churches, this is "simply because of their determination to honor the God they love."

Consider Barna's description of these brave souls. "Like their role model, Jesus Christ, they ignite fierce resistance merely by being present and holy. It is perhaps that holy presence that will get Revolutionaries in the deepest trouble they will face—and that will bring lasting healing to a culture that has rebelled for too long against its loving Creator. These Christian zealots are radically reshaping both American society and the Christian Church. Their legacy is likely to be a spiritual reformation of unprecedented proportions in the United States, and perhaps the world."

Beyond this, Barna warns that Christians are not to judge these believers "who are dedicated to pleasing God and blessing people" when "they are true to biblical principles and commands." There lies the main problem with Barna's Revolutionaries and the revolution he so eagerly promotes. Where this revolution falls short is seen precisely in light of the Bible's presentation of the normative Christian life and the means of grace whereby believers are shaped into Christlikeness.

We should be fair and open-minded in understanding the passions Barna presents as formative for the Revolutionaries. He identifies these as a desire for intimate worship, faith-based conversations, intentional spiritual growth, servanthood, resource investment, spiritual friendships, and family faith. While some might describe these passions with different language, no one can doubt that Barna is on to something when he points to these issues as the reason for the Revolutionaries' dissatisfaction with so many existing congregations. Almost everything he says about the inadequacy of local church life is validated by even a brief acquaintance with the superficiality of American evangelicalism.

We should remember that Barna's dissatisfaction with the church is not a new development. In 1998 he published *The Second Coming of the Church*, in which he warned: "At the risk of sounding like an alarmist, I believe the Church in America has no more than five years—perhaps even less—to turn itself around and begin to affect the culture, rather than be affected by it."

Still, something has gone tragically wrong when a marketing researcher declares that the church of the Lord Jesus Christ is simply doomed—especially in terms of local congregations. "There is nothing inherently wrong with being involved in a local church," he argues. "But realize that being part of a group that calls itself a 'church' does not make you saved, holy, righteous, or godly any more than being in Yankee Stadium makes you a professional baseball player. Participating in church-based activities does not necessarily draw you closer to God or prepare you for a life that satisfies Him or enhances your existence. Being a member of a congregation does not make you spiritually righteous anymore than being a member of the Democratic Party makes you a liberal wing nut."

A closer look at that argument reveals a glaring *non sequitur*. It completely avoids the question of what the church *should* be, and it undercuts a basic biblical premise—that the local church is *supposed* to be the very place where Christians are drawn into the very passions Barna identifies—and into so much more.

The fatal attractiveness of his argument is found most clearly in this short paragraph: "Being in a right relationship with God and His people is what matters. Scripture teaches us that devoting your life to loving God with all your heart, mind, strength, and soul is what honors Him. Being part of a local church may facilitate that. Or it might not."

Barna wants to identify the Church at the "macro" level as the universal fellowship of all believers. But the local church—representing the "micro" dimension of institutional church life, is more often an impediment to spiritual growth, in his view, than a means of shaping Christians into authentic discipleship.

We must remember that Barna is a market researcher and not a theologian. Still, he has ventured into this territory and risks making sweeping theological statements that simply will not bear closer scrutiny. He implies that the Bible reveals no normative ecclesiology and that local churches, as known today, are simply "abiblical"—not addressed in the Bible at all.

He argues: "The Bible does not rigidly define the corporate practices, rituals, or structures that must be embraced in order to have a proper church. It does, however, offer direction regarding the importance and integration of fundamental spiritual disciplines into one's life."

That is true up to a point, of course. It is true that today's pattern of church organization with publications, youth ministries, gymnasiums, and church buildings is not drawn directly from the New Testament. Of all persons, a marketer should understand this reality very well, since he is best positioned to understand how the challenges of the modern world have been met with organizational responses at the local church level.

What George Barna misses is the big picture of New Testament ecclesiology—a picture that identifies congregational life as the very means whereby believers are shaped into Christlikeness and Christian maturity through the ministry of the Word, the fellowship of the saints, and the normative patterns of church life. Barna's Revolutionaries may be involved on spiritual quests that have added dimensions of meaning to their lives, but what they lack is the accountability, deployment, mutuality, and koinonia of the local church as envisioned in the New Testament.

Only the briefest of glances at the New Testament, looking particularly at the book of Acts and at the various letters to the churches, would reveal the centrality of preaching, discipline, congregational fellowship, and the central practices of baptism and the Lord's Supper. Barna offers genuine insight when he points to the larger cultural trends of generational transition, the rise of a new view of life, dissatisfaction with irrelevant structures, the impact of technology, the importance

of genuine personal relationships, direct participation in reality, and the quest for deeper meaning. Still, one must wonder about Barna's nearly complete lack of nuance. What are we to make of Barna's claim that "Jesus Christ is the focal point of the life of every Christian Revolutionary today. It is His call to revolutionary living that beckons us and guides us on this path?" Are the Revolutionaries never wrong? Beyond this, Barna's definition of spiritual transformation seems amazingly superficial. "Spiritual transformation is any significant and lasting transition in your life wherein you switch from one substantial perspective or practice to something wholly different that genuinely alters you at a very basic level," he writes. That's all?

He points to a cluster of what he calls "spiritual mini-movements" as indicative of where the Revolutionaries are at work. These mini-movements are, he argues, reshaping the shape of Christianity in America, from the emergence of cyber-churches and house churches to a new emphasis upon family and home-schooling.

Part of the problem undoubtedly lies in Barna's marketing approach to the church. A look through Barna's many books—all widely read and helpful in understanding larger cultural trends—reveals that he has never articulated anything close to a New Testament vision of the local church.

In *God in the Wasteland*, David F. Wells points to the problem of approaching the church from the angle of marketing. "A business is in the market simply to sell its products; it doesn't ask consumers to surrender themselves to the product. The church, on the other hand, does call for such a surrender. It is not merely marketing a product; it is declaring Christ's sovereignty over all of life and declaring the necessity of obedient submission to him and to the truth of his Word. When the church is properly fulfilling the task it has been assigned, it is demanding far more than any business would ever think of asking prospective customers. Simply put, the church is in the business of truth, not profit. Its message—the message of God's Word—enters the innermost place in a person's life, the place of secrets and anguish, of hope and despair, of guilt and forgiveness, and it demands to be heard and obeyed in a way that not even the most brazen and unprincipled advertisers would think of emulating."

As in the past, George Barna has served the church by describing and documenting trends that are shaping the culture and in revealing the superficiality and failings of all too many local congregations. Regrettably, his prescription is even worse than his diagnosis, for minimizing the importance of the local church runs directly counter to the Bible's vision for the Christian life. The real answer to Barna's concern is the recovery of biblical ecclesiology—a recovery that would relativize and revolutionize the entire landscape of contemporary Christianity in America.

The revolution we truly need is a recovery of the New Testament vision of the local church—a comprehensive embrace of the totality of congregational life, including all of the functions and marks revealed in Scripture. This is the great task to which this generation of Christians is called—and we will need Barna's Revolutionaries in order to make this happen.

Channeling all these energies into a comprehensive recovery of the biblical vision for local churches would be a revolution worth joining—and worth celebrating. *Viva that Revolution!*

