

Barna's Dangerous Proposal

George Barna has crossed a line with his new book, Revolution. Pollster George Barna has provided a valuable service to leaders in business, politics and ministry by identifying important spiritual trends. A keen analyst, he warned us in his groundbreaking 1990 book, *The Frog in the Kettle*, that evangelical Christians don't necessarily embrace evangelical values.

But Barna has crossed a line with his new book, *Revolution*. The tempered sociologist has become something of a mad scientist. By cooking the numbers and injecting his own biases into this experiment, he has created a Frankenstein that is now on the loose.

We should all be concerned about this monster.

Barna's theory is that large numbers of American Christians are disillusioned with church and have quit the Sunday morning routine. He applauds this trend and labels these church dropouts "revolutionaries" who—in his opinion—have more spiritual creativity and passion than stick-in-the-mud traditionalists.

He also believes that those who have left the mainstream church will soon overhaul modern Christianity. He describes their mission as "a daring redefinition of the church as we know it."

Barna offers a gloomy assessment of the future of the American religious scene, claiming that by the year 2025: (1) the number of churches in this country will dramatically decline;

(2) church attendance will drop; (3) donations to churches will plummet; and (4) fewer clergy will receive a livable salary while denominations are forced to make huge cutbacks.

Barna seems to welcome this scenario, and he casts disaffected Christians as the heroes. They are tired of tithing, weary of boring sermons and burned out on the religious routine. With revolutionary zeal—and with Barna as their mentor—they are challenged to buck the system and start meeting together in glorious spontaneity in homes and coffee bars.

If you still attend a “regular” church, Barna makes you feel like a weirdo. According to his research, the relevant Christians who care about Jesus and love people will say adios to their pastors and write “Ichabod” on the doors of ecclesiastical buildings. He envisions a “spiritual awakening” in which people are drawn away from the church, not toward it.

Barna even provides a creed we can recite at the end of his book, which includes this statement: “I am not called to attend or join a church. I am called to be the Church.”

I don’t want to pick a fight here because I agree with many of Barna’s views. Of course it’s true that Christians don’t have to worship in religious buildings. Of course most ministry should be happening outside church walls. Of course we should leave room for creative church models to emerge (including the house churches we profiled in our article on page 52 of this issue).

The real issue here is not where churches meet. Many of the charismatic congregations I visit each month gather in schools, offices, industrial parks or civic buildings. Last

year I preached at a church in India that meets in a farmer's front yard.

But there is a huge difference between the growing organic churches of the developing world (all of which have appointed leaders and apostolic oversight) and the loosey-goosey revolution Barna advocates. He wants to reinvent the church without its biblical structure and New Testament order—and without the people who are anointed by God to guide it.

That's not innovation. That's anarchy. To follow Barna's defective thesis to its logical conclusion would require us to fire all pastors, close all Bible colleges, padlock our sanctuaries and then huddle in a "spontaneous" home group led by renegades.

No thanks. I have met too many of these "revolutionaries." Many of them are angry and cynical. They have no respect for godly authority, so they flit from one place to another and then leave as soon as someone dares to confront their pride. With all respect to Barna, this flawed proposal needs to be recalled before it causes serious spiritual damage.

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