

## “REVOLUTION” BY GEORGE BARNA REFORMATION OR REBELLION?

Acclaimed church analyst George Barna has recently released a new book entitled, *Revolution* sending tidal waves of controversy into the massive ocean of evangelical opinions. His focus: a new and emerging breed of Christians, over 20 million strong (p. 13) who prize authentic spirituality, but who are growing less attached to the local church. In his book, Barna calls for Christians to move beyond the established church in order to be the Church instead. “Or, put more succinctly, the Revolution is about recognizing that we are not called to *go* to church. We are called to *be* the church” (p. 39).

This Revolution, says Barna, is “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” (p. viii). This movement is postured to advance the Church [the universal church – all true believers in Jesus Christ] and to redefine the church [the local church consisting of formal structures, leaders, and experiences]” (p. x). Barna predicts that it will “permanently alter the contours of the body of Christ in America” (p. 105).

On p. 8 Barna says, “The key to understanding Revolutionaries is not what church they attend, or even if they attend. Instead it’s their complete dedication to being thoroughly Christian by viewing every moment of life through a spiritual lens and making every decision in light of biblical principles.” In other words, **true spirituality as a Christian has little to nothing to do with a commitment to or involvement with a local church.** It has everything to do, instead, with your personal commitment to Christ and how that transformation impacts your world. On p. 29 of his book, he states, “Whether you become a Revolutionary immersed in, minimally involved in, or completely disassociated from a local church is irrelevant to me (and within boundaries, to God). What matters is not whom you associate with (i.e. a local church), but who you are.”

Many Christians, he argues from statistical survey, have left the local church, and it was just the catalyst they needed to propel them into authentic spirituality. We should also expect, reasons Barna, that local churches should embrace this movement by coming along side these revolutionaries rather than oppose them, lest we be guilty of dividing the body of Christ.

We should expect to see a reduction in the number of churches, church attendance to decline as Christians devote themselves to a wider array of spiritual events, giving to the local church will drop because of investments in other ministry ventures, fewer church programs will be sustained to make way for communal living, pastors will no longer receive a livable salary from their congregations to focus on shepherding and preaching [which many argue is good so that their pastors can understand and relate to the culture better]. And all of this is what Barna calls, the “Great Reawakening of the Church” (see pp. 107-8).

The bottom line, Barna states on p. 112, is this: “Revolutionaries distancing themselves from formal congregations does not reflect a willingness to ignore God as much as a passion to deepen

their connection with Him...a need better served outside the framework of congregational structures.” This is alarming, because George Barna is considered to be the number one most read and trusted consultants among pastors in the nation. This book in other words, will be in the hands of hundreds of thousands of pastors in America, who will take this and run! But for the purpose of this review, this book not only forecasts where evangelicalism is heading, but it forces us to ask a serious and fundamental question: *Can a true Christian really be spiritually mature, and in some cases even more helped in his maturity by leaving the establishment of the local church and blazing his own trail, based on who God has made him to be?*

The purpose of this review is to analyze the assessment of Barna’s conclusions in the light of God’s Word and answer this fundamental question, considering both the strengths and weaknesses of Barna’s assessments. As a pastor, I am deeply concerned about the future and the health of the church, but moreover I am committed to pursuing discernment. In **1 Thessalonians 5:20-21**, the apostle Paul urged us to **“examine everything carefully; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil.”** That is what I want us to do.

### **CAN’T ARGUE WITH THAT...**

Barna rightly admits that his book will generate severe criticism, especially from those who have not derived their opinions from a careful reading, but from a surface understanding of his research. I have read his book carefully, with pen and Bible in hand. My mantra is different than those whose reaction is a knee-jerk.

To begin with, I want to be fair to Barna, and also affirm those aspects of this movement that are good, because they are a response to major inadequacies in the modern day church, which are frightfully tragic. In addition, I want to give credit to Barna’s motive is quite clearly stated throughout the book to be centered on the Kingdom-orientation and Christ-focus of the Revolutionary. In addition to his motivation, here are some strong points of Barna’s research that everyone can affirm. This movement away from the local church as championed in Barna’s Revolution has certain values that we would affirm. It:

#### **1. HONORS PERSONAL AUTHENTICITY**

By authenticity, I mean that Barna is calling for a radical kind of Christian living that is discontent with the status quo. Barna does not, as he is many times accused of doing, promote a mediocre kind of Christianity. He calls for zealots! Listen to the classification of people that he commends:

“Revolutionaries” were classified on the basis of meeting 11 specific criteria. They have a clear sense of the meaning and purpose of their life; describe their relationship with and faith in God as the top priority in their life; consider themselves to be "Christian"; read the Bible regularly; pray regularly; deem their faith to be very important in their life; contend that the main objective in their life is to love God with all their heart, mind, strength and soul; describe God as the "all-knowing, all-powerful being who created the universe and still rules it today"; have made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is important in their life

today; believe that when they die they will go to heaven only because they have confessed their sins and accepted Jesus Christ as their savior; and say that their faith in Christ has "greatly transformed" their life (Article on [www.Barna.org](http://www.Barna.org) regarding the statistical criteria used in *Revolution*).

That is merely the entry point for someone to be considered a Revolutionary, which he says is over 20 million members strong! They are “a demographically diverse group of people,” he says on p. 121ff, “who are determined to let nothing stand in the way of an authentic and genuine experience with God. They are involved in a variety of activities and connections designed to satisfy a spiritual focus. They are God-lovers and joyfully obedient servants. They are willing to do whatever it takes to draw closer to God, to bond with Him, and to bring Him glory and pleasure.”

He further identifies them as those who daily express their worship, naturally communicate the Good News of Jesus Christ to others, strive to know more about God’s ways, invest their resources for Kingdom outcomes, have friendships that hinge on spiritual growth, seek to impact the world around them – starting with their families first, and all the while centered upon God in a world of distractions and seductions! He says that Revolutionaries recognize that spiritual success is more about surrender than results; that true spiritual fruit is flat-out, no-excuses obedience to God; and that their beliefs, identity, behavior, and relationships blend to project a persona that pricks the spirit in everyone around them. **I don’t know about you, but that is the kind of Christian life I want to live and which I want my wife and children to live. But more importantly, it is the kind of life the Bible says God wants me to live! I want a life of personal authenticity!** Barna does a good job in chapter 8 and 11, identifying the marks of a Revolutionary, in which I would aspire to be classified. Barna is right to loathe superficial spirituality. He is also correct in that he:

## 2. LAMENTS INSTITUTIONAL RELIGIOSITY

Barna is opposed to the kind of irrelevant institutions and organizations that exist for themselves but which do not move God’s people forward spiritually! Such was true of the self-righteous establishment of the Scribes and Pharisees in Jesus’ day. Such was the apostate Roman Catholic Church that Martin Luther challenged in 1517. It was an externally focused group of religious hypocrites whose claims to spirituality were empty, but whose decorations, furniture, wardrobes, activities, and teachings were devoid of anything truly transformational. That is his present diagnosis of the church of Jesus Christ in America today. And by large, in many ways, I would have to agree with him. He is accurate in his lamentation of “those who see institutional survival as equally or more important than the alleged influence of the institution they defend” (p. 39). Consider this assessment:

“There is nothing inherently wrong with being involved in a local church. 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 satisfied Him or enhances your existence... Being in a right relationship with God and His people is what matters...Being part of a local church may facilitate that. Or it

might not... However, you should realize that that *the Bible neither describes nor promotes the local church as we know it today...* The local church many have come to cherish – the services, offices, programs, buildings, ceremonies – is neither biblical nor unbiblical. It is abiblical – that is, such an organization is not addressed in the Bible” (p. 36-37).

His point is this – the local church, in many ways has failed to reach non-Christian and progress Christian people because it has become too focused on chasing fads, constructing buildings, administrating programs, etc., much of which characterizes the modern church. And in it all, the cause of Christ has been blurred, and in some cases, lost altogether in the institution.

When you study the New Testament, you will see a much different church than the one that is most common today, and is doing a great job succeeding at the things that really don’t matter. Barna is again correct about the condition of mainstream evangelicalism and the failure of the institutionalized version of Christianity that is not disciple-making. And so to urge churches to recover this commitment to progressing the people of God forward, Barna rightfully identifies another solution. This Revolution:

### **3. AFFIRMS MULTIFACETED MINISTRY**

By “Multifaceted Ministry” I mean to capture the sense in which George Barna brings a much needed balance to the traditional church model. He understands why many churches are either reclining or declining in their ministries, because they are imbalanced. Too many churches are fragmented so that there is no purpose to the ministries. While churches are busy establishing monuments and buildings with programs and enthusiasm, very few are actually being transformed and equipped to transform others. Too many churches are distracted from the mission of the church, having lost sight of the Kingdom. Barna says on pp. 13-14,

Revolutionaries “have no use for churches that play religious games, whether those games are worship services that drone on without the presence of God or ministry programs that bear no spiritual fruit. Revolutionaries [avoid] ministries that soft sell our sinful nature to expand organizational turf. They refuse to follow people in ministry leadership positions who cast a personal vision rather than God’s, who seek popularity rather than the proclamation of truth in their public statements, or who are more concerned about their own legacy than that of Jesus Christ. They refuse to donate one more dollar to man-made monuments that mark their own achievements and guarantee their place in history. They are unimpressed by accredited degrees and endowed chairs in Christian colleges and seminaries that produce young people incapable of defending the Bible or unwilling to devote their lives to serving others. And Revolutionaries are embarrassed by language that promises Christian love and holiness but turns out to be all sizzle and no substance. In fact, many Revolutionaries have been active in good churches that have Biblical preaching, people coming to Christ and being baptized, a full roster of interesting classes and programs, and a congregation packed with nice people... But Revolutionaries innately realize that it is not enough to go with the flow. The experience provided through their church,

although better than average, still seems flat. 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 a true revolution in thinking, behavior, and experience, where settling for what is merely good and above average is defeat.”

In other books, Barna has defined what he means by the kind of intentional discipleship that brings the public and private aspects of ministry into balance, and in this book echoes the same sentiment with a plea for churches to think less about a building and more about being a community of the redeemed (for more see pp. 89-90). His unwillingness to recommend the local church as it currently, flows from another distinctive of this Revolution – that which:

#### **4. RECOGNIZES STATISTICAL REALITY**

Barna has studied the practices and spiritual disciplines of many of those who have stopped going to church compared to those who remain in many of those kinds of churches described above and the comparison is not only surprising but shameful as it reflects on what the local church is doing, or not doing for that matter.

- More than seven out of every 10 [70%] revolutionaries are actively serving in their community, compared to 53% among non-revolutionary born again adults.
- The average amount of money donated by revolutionaries in 2005 was 82% higher, despite household income levels that are similar.
- Almost two out of every three revolutionaries (64%) study the Bible every day. That’s close to three times the percentage of non-revolutionary born again adults who do so (23%).
- A majority of revolutionaries (54%) has a quiet time with God each day. Less than one-third of non-revolutionary born again adults (31%) follows that pattern.
- While close to half of all revolutionary families spend time each day studying the Bible together (42%), the same is true among just one out of every eight non-revolutionary born again families (12%). In fact, a majority of the non-revolutionary born again families admit to “never” or “rarely” studying God’s Word together.
- About six out of every ten revolutionaries (57%) experience “intimate, personally stirring worship of God” on a daily basis. The same held true for only four out of every ten non-revolutionary born again adults (39%).
- Non-revolutionary born again adults were just half as likely (15%, compared to 27% among revolutionaries) to engage in daily conversations with a mentor, friend or spiritual overseer in which they were held accountable for following the beliefs they possess.
- More than four out of five revolutionaries (82%) had shared their faith in Jesus Christ with a non-believer in the preceding 12 months. That was considerably more than the 54% among non-revolutionary born again adults.
- Almost all revolutionaries (97%) strongly affirm “the Bible is totally accurate in all of the principles it teaches.” Far fewer non-revolutionary born again adults (65%) join them in that perspective.

- Whereas eight out of ten revolutionaries believe that there is absolute moral truth, barely half as many of the non-revolutionary born again adults (43%) concur.
- The passion of revolutionaries is partially fueled by their belief that Satan is real. Two out of every three (65%) firmly argue that Satan is real and affects people’s lives; just one out of every three non-revolutionary born again adults (35%) buys that point of view.
- Despite being unfairly criticized as “isolated” and “independent,” this research found that revolutionaries are more tuned in to the importance of community in spiritual life. Not only do they have a wider net of faith-based personal relationships that affects their spiritual development, but they believe that someone cannot become a “complete and mature” follower of Christ without being personally involved in a spiritual community. While four out of ten revolutionaries strongly endorse this notion, only half as many (21%) of the non-revolutionary born again adults do so.
- While a startling percentage of the non-revolutionary born again adults agrees that a good person can earn their salvation (even though they contend that their own salvation was based on grace, not good works), a large majority of revolutionaries (75%) strongly rejects the works-based or multiple-means-to-salvation arguments. (Only 44% of the non-revolutionary born again adults strongly asserts that salvation can never be earned.)<sup>[1]</sup>

A word of caution: as I read these statistics, I was grieved at the level of superficiality in those who fit the category of non-revolutionary, and yet I have to wonder about the criteria used to determine whether the people surveyed were true believers or make believers, which Jesus and others warned us about (**Matthew 7:21-23; Titus 1:16**). Granted, we can only take them by their words in a survey, but this must be kept in mind, especially if 25% of the revolutionaries accept some form of works salvation.

But his point is well-taken: those who are consistently a part of a local church read their Bible less, worship less, spend less devotional time with family; share the Gospel less, believe the Gospel less, give less, and have less meaningful spiritual relationships with those who enhance their faith. The deduction from his surveys is that the local church is doing very little to help their people live out authentic spirituality; and those who have left the local church have done so in order to blaze their own trails and make better use of their time than warming a pew. Point taken! Instead of a local church priority, they have given themselves over to a lifestyle that:

## 5. PROMOTES KINGDOM PRIORITY

Over and over again in his book, Barna communicates a passion and priority of the Kingdom of God over against those whose focus has become isolated to their church. He maintains that the whole Kingdom is a greater emphasis in Scripture than the local church and the local church will only fulfill its mission when it concentrates on this priority. He is correct. Listen to his checklist of affirmations of a revolutionary he offers:

“I am a Revolutionary in the service of God Almighty. My life is not my own; I exist as a free person but have voluntarily become a slave to God. My role on earth is to live as a Revolutionary, committed to love, holiness, and advancing God’s Kingdom. My life is not about me and my natural desires; it is all about knowing, loving, and serving God with all my heart, mind, strength, and soul. Therefore I acknowledge the following:

- I am a sinner, broken by my disobedience but restored by Jesus Christ in order to participate in good works that please God. I am not perfect, but Jesus Christ makes me righteous in God’s eyes, and the Holy Spirit leads me towards greater holiness.
- God created me for His purposes. My desire as a Revolution is to fulfill those ends, and those ends alone. When I get out of bed each day, I do so for one purpose: to love, obey, and serve God and His people.
- Every breath I take is a declaration of war against Satan and a commitment to opposing him.
- God does not need me to fight His fight, but he invites me to allow Him to fight through me. It is my privilege to serve Him in that manner. I anticipate and will gladly endure various hardships as I serve God; for this is the price of participation in winning the spiritual war.
- I do not need to save the world. Jesus Christ has already done that. I cannot transform the world, but I can allow God to use me to transform some part of it.
- My commitment to the Revolution of faith is sealed by my complete surrender to God’s ways and His will. I will gratefully do what He asks of me simply because He loves me enough to ask. I gain my security, success, and significance through my surrender to Him.
- Worship is not an event I attend or a process I observe; it is the lifestyle I lead.
- I do not give away 10 percent of my resource. I surrender 100 percent.
- God has given me natural abilities and supernatural abilities, all intended to advance His Kingdom. I will deploy those abilities for that purpose.
- The proof of my status as a Revolutionary is the love I show to God and people.
- There is strength in relationships; I am bound at a heart and soul level to other Revolutionaries, and I will bless believers whenever I have the chance.
- To achieve victory in the spiritual war in which we are immersed, there is nothing I must accomplish; I must simply follow Christ with everything I have.
- There is no greater calling than to know and serve God.
- The world is desperately seeking meaning and purpose. I will respond to that need with the Good News and meaningful service.
- Absolute moral and spiritual truth exists, is knowable, and is intended for my life; it is accessible through the Bible.
- I want nothing more than to hear God say to me, “Well done, My good and faithful servant.”

Thank you Lord God for loving me, for saving me, for refining me, and for including me in the work of Your Kingdom. My life is Yours to use as You please. I love you.”

Sounds great! I’m there! I am ready to sign my name at the bottom and get to it! Except for the one resolution I skipped over: “I am not called to attend or join a church, I am called to be the church.”

That is where my concern for Barna’s endorsement of this movement in present day evangelicalism begins. I believe his answer to these concerns, which he identifies with precision are covered with several...

## FATAL FLAWS...

In all fairness to Barna, he candidly states that “The Revolution is not about eliminating, dismissing, or disparaging the local church. It is about building relationships, commitments, processes, and tools that enable us to be God-lovers we were intended to be from the beginning of creation” (p. 38). However, having affirmed the strengths of Barna’s observations about these Revolutionaries, the weaknesses of his solutions are glaring. By omitting the local church because of its supposed irrelevancy, “Revolution” has several fatal flaws. It:

### 1. DEEMPHASIZES BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

The most important and essential change agent in the life of a person is woefully deemphasized as vitally relevant to this Revolution. Barna admits at the beginning that his book, which is a battle cry for Revolutionaries, is not “theologically dense” (p. x), and he is correct – it is not. Audaciously, he states on p. 89, “As much as [Revolutionaries] may appreciate the intensity and gustiness of John the Baptist, they recognize that a solitary voice in the desert has less effect than a united voice in the marketplace.” In other words, bold and authoritative preaching of God’s Word has less impact than relationships.

Granted, Barna spends some time examining some of the traits of Christ and some of what Paul had to say in Romans<sup>[2]</sup> about this kind of lifestyle, but his answers come more from statistical pragmatics than Biblical authority. To be fair, he does call for a clarification of essential core beliefs, which must come from applying the Bible which he rightly believes is “perfect and reliable revelation designed to instruct and guide all people” (p. 88). He acknowledges that much of what you can receive by way is instruction you can download from the Internet, order on tape, or subscribe to your email inbox from your favorite Bible teacher or author. It doesn’t require Sunday church.

However, his fatal flaws consist in his willingness to include conservatives and liberals in his description of these Revolutionaries without consideration of their theological bent. There is no apparent theological hedge around this Revolution, and given its detachment from the local church, a detaching from the pulpit necessarily follows, leading into all kinds of potential doctrinal deviance.

Pastors and Elders are commanded by God in 1 Timothy 5:17 to serve the church in how they “work hard at preaching and teaching.” Detaching from the local church means leaving the hard work of laboring in the Word and doctrine in the hands of the untrained and undiscerning. If their commitment or ability to approach Scripture texts with Biblical precision is less than what God commands (2 Timothy 2:15) they will invariably fall prey to error and in some cases, heresy. Error will not sanctify and heresy will condemn. Both of these thrive without faithful pastors who are the watchmen and shepherds described in Ezekiel 33-34.

**The reason that the churches in Barna’s research are in the state they are is precisely because of a famine in the land of the Word of God!** It is because they have neglected this priority! Pastors are not preaching the Word of God, or they are preaching it wrongly! The

solution is not to leave the church but train or replace those pastors with Biblically equipped, faithful expositors of the Word of God! A commitment to the Word of God is the catalyst to everything else in the church and naturally causes authentic character and personal commitment – but the truth must come first. And unless those who are called by God and gifted are laboring in the Word, the doctrinal purity of the church will be polluted.

No revival in Biblical history has ever occurred without a return to sound doctrine, mainly through a strong pulpit (see Nehemiah 8)! No revival in church history was ever divorced from the local church! Barna, though he communicates a clear understanding of the role of the Word (especially preaching) and the local church in the past (see chapter 12), this Revolution is different in that it is not “relying on a relative handful of inspired preachers to promote a national revival.”<sup>[3]</sup> Thus it misjudges redemptive history.

## **2. DILUTES ECCLESIASTICAL AUTHORITY**

Detaching from the local church not only removes you from pastoral preaching and teaching, it removes you from the accountability and authority which the New Testament commands believers to be under (Hebrews 13:7, 17). Barna calls for us to see “New leaders [who] will gain recognition and authority among [these detached] believers” (p. 106) over against those kinds of leaders who must approve and control how believers reach the world and honoring God (p. 112). In other words, Revolutionaries are not going to be held at bay under the authority of institutional leaders. They are not going to let anyone stop them from impacting their world for Christ.

And yet, when they stop going to the local church, who are their Elders and Pastors? Where are the Deacons? What do they do with those passages that command them to “obey your leaders and submit to them for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account?” (Hebrews 13:17). Moreover, how do those leaders hold these Revolutionaries accountable for doctrinal and moral purity when there is no church to enforce accountability, even to the point of excommunication, which Jesus mentioned in Matthew 18:15-20? The Revolutionary concept not only encourages men and women to disengage from churches that are not meeting their needs, it is fostering a rebellious tendency towards church leaders.

For sure, too many pastors have concentrated on their own legacy and failed miserably in their service to Christ. Many, I am sure, stopped going to church because of a certain leader. But the commands of Scripture cannot be ignored. Leaders are only effective in this model, if they help customize Christianity, which:

## **3. OVEREMPHASIZES PERSONAL INDIVIDUALITY**

Absolutely everything in this *Revolution* has to do with one’s personal relationship with Jesus, which the New Testament says we were saved for (John 17:3; Philippians 3:8-14). No argument there! And yet the Scriptures do not teach one’s personal relationship to Christ apart from a personal relationship to a local church. Where is the Christian in the New Testament who is not identified with a local assembly?

To Barna’s credit, he is not calling for Christians to abandon one another, if they abandon the church, but he is overlooking basic New Testament ecclesiology, which makes a clear distinction between the Universal and Local Church, and the priority of both. Barna is elevating one over the other.

The point is this: the New Testament knows nothing of a believer that is not vitally connected to the local church. In fact, those who disconnected from the local church are mentioned only in two passages in Scripture. Both of which describe apostates:

1 John 2:19, “They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, so that it would be shown that they all are not of us.”

Hebrews 10:24-25, “and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking [utterly] our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.”<sup>[4]</sup>

In other words, when the New Testament weighs in on those who leave the local church, it robs them of assurance that they truly have a relationship with Christ. That does not mean that these “20 million Revolutionaries” are apostates. It just means that the New Testament is not friendly towards what they are doing and the nearest category of people who fit their description are those that are unredeemed, identified as those having left the local church.

This fragmenting of evangelicalism, Barna believes, is a good thing. He says on p. 67, “While this patchwork of spiritual experiences and expressions will produce a seemingly incoherent and indecipherable religious landscape, it will also render people’s spiritual lives more exciting because they’ll be able to respond to immediate needs and possibilities. The fragmented nature of the new approach to spirituality...will become the advantage that facilitates a deeper commitment to spiritual focus by millions of young people.”

If you want a simpler way of understanding what is behind this movement, Barna says it is in “people’s insistence on choices and their desire to have customized experiences” (p. 62). The local church had better make a way or get out of the way. He longs for the day when, on p. 104, “believers will not have an institution such as the local church to use as a crutch or excuse for wimpy faith.”

#### 4. UNDERESTIMATES PROVIDENTIAL CERTAINTY

The great omission in Barna’s entire book is any confidence in what Jesus said about the church, the very first time he mentioned it. In **Matthew 16:18**, “...I will build My church, and the gates of Hades will not overpower it.” Of course, Jesus did not mean the brick, mortar, steeples, pews, and stained glass – he meant the organism of redeemed people who live under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. And though faithfulness is a command to His church, perseverance and security is His work. It is *His* church, which is meant to function according to *His* Word, in fulfillment of *His* mission, and all for the purposes of *His* glory. And nothing, not even death

itself [“**the gates of Hades**”] can thwart the progress of the church, which His Word has clearly described in local assemblies.

In other words, God will always guide His true church into His will, and preserve its existence throughout history, even under the most intense opposition. He has not promised the endurance of every local church, for some He Himself has closed with His hand (**Revelation 2-3**), but His promise was given to local churches!

In fact, when He spoke critically to the struggling local churches in Asia Minor in Revelation 2-3, most of whom He was ready to close, He sent through John to the “messengers” (the preachers), the book of Revelation to tell them that despite the horrific onslaughts that will come against them, both from within and without, God wins and the church will persevere. They as local churches were called to overcome, not abandon the local church for a more preferable version of customized Christianity. God told them as local churches to recover Biblical faithfulness, not disband and reorganize in another way! And for this commitment to overcome, God promised to supply their every need. His providence will guarantee it!

Jesus and Barna agree and differ. They agree that local churches should remove whatever stands in the way of God’s people living for Him with authenticity. They agree that unloving, insincere, hypocritical, carnally-minded churches are dead and should repent or close. Jesus however calls for the local church to fight in order to thrive, operating according to Biblical principles. Barna could hardly care less whether you ever attach to another local church again, just so long as you yourself thrive, with other Christians. But thrive you will not, without a Biblical local church. For without the local church, this Revolution faces a serious threat. Leaving the local church is deadly for a 5<sup>th</sup> reason. It:

##### **5. WELCOMES SATANIC BRUTALITY**

Twice in the New Testament, Paul the apostle uses a phrase to describe those who have been removed from the local church under some form of public church discipline. He calls it being “delivered over to Satan” in 1 Corinthians 5:5 and 1 Timothy 1:20. This rightly interpreted means, when the entire assembly is gathered, resolving to remove the professing believer from the privileges of assembling with the local body of believers, so that as he is taken out of the special umbrella of blessing and protection of God given to the church, his body is destroyed in the hopes that his soul would be saved on the last day. In other words, when someone is put out of the church, he is put in harm’s way, so that Satan might afflict him in order to show that man how much better it is to live in purity with the church (see 1 John 5:19).

Barna has not urged Christians to avoid other Christians or become isolated. In fact, he is trying to overturn that trend in mainstream churches filled with lonely people. He is encouraging networks of relationships that stimulate spiritual focus. He is advocating Christian community. But his fragmented model leaves far too many unsuspecting Christians vulnerable to the snares that Satan lays for those who are detached from the local church; snares for which his book leaves no warning. To urge Christians to move away from the local assembly of believers is to put them in a dangerous position, because it is when they learn to live apart from the local church, Satan does his most deadly work.

## IN CONCLUSION...

Barna is correct in his observations of those who call themselves Christians and whose relationship to the local church has meant very little to their spiritual progress. He is justified in calling for a serious change. Pastors and church leaders must do something about the local church’s woeful failure to impact the world as it otherwise could. These revolutionaries are carving new paths because the local church, with its infatuation with fads and traditions is becoming increasingly irrelevant. He is right that Jesus Christ deserves and calls for a radical and transforming commitment that impacts lives. He is right that God wants His people to be the Church – the church being a people not a program or property! But George Barna is wrong about the role the local church has in God’s economy. He is wrong that Christians should embrace a Biblically indefensible move away from the local church. He is wrong that pastors and church leaders should move away from their God-appointed duty to study and preach the Word of the living God! And he is wrong to think that a person is spiritually mature who has little or no connection to the local church.

At best, some like me will hear Barna calling for a reformation of the church, to return to balanced Biblical priorities that include more than Scriptural data. My fear however, given the severity of its fatal flaws, George Barna’s *Revolution* will lead to and further encourage evangelical **REBELLION!**

I offer this as a critique not only of a book, but primarily a critique of a movement, which Barna has not started, but which Barna hopes to champion and influence. If he could eliminate the flaws I think his call to the local church is well timed and wisely heeded, given the laser-like precision with which he identifies the problem, for which I am thankful. But the strengths of this movement alone do not justify it. The movement itself must submit to Biblical principles to the exclusion of none before God will bless it, or before I will stand by it.

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<sup>[1]</sup> Online article from [www.Barna.org](http://www.Barna.org) “Faith Revolutionaries Stand Out From the Crowd” March 6, 2006.

<sup>[2]</sup> In fact, as I read his defense of the Revolution from Romans, I found myself trying to go back into Romans to see how what Barna said it meant came from Paul’s letter. Funny that Barna should go to one of the most theologically dense books of Scripture and come away with such an inadequate understanding of it. I cannot help but draw a parallel to the “Emergent” church movement (referenced by Barna on p. 66) and its redefinition of Romans to justify the New Perspective on Paul as teaching that Romans is not about the satisfaction of a holy God in His wrath towards sinful man through Jesus Christ, but in how the community of God should live with one another in the world as God-followers.

<sup>[3]</sup> For a more extensive treatment of Whitfield’s, Luther’s, and Wesley’s view of the role of the local church, see Beckman, *The Second Reformation*.

<sup>[4]</sup> Barna’s application of this passage as being fulfilled at a local church just the same as it would at a “Starbucks” falls woefully short of the authorial intent of Hebrews.



# revolution

## **FATAL FLAWS! IT:**

- 1. Deemphasizes Biblical Theology*
- 2. Dilutes Ecclesiastical Authority*
- 3. Overemphasizes Personal Individuality*
- 4. Underestimates Providential Certainty*
- 5. Welcomes Satanic Brutality*