

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

717 North Stapley Drive, Mesa, AZ 85203 Phone: (480) 833-7500

Website: www.churchredeemeraz.org

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Pastor/Teacher
Gary L. W. Johnson

Why the Local Church is Necessary

The local church, in the very influential opinion of George Barna, is completely gratuitous – in fact, it has by and large become irrelevant, according to his way of thinking.¹ Barna, it should be noted, has *zero* theological training – and it shows in practically everything he writes. He is a pollster,² not a theologian, but this hasn't stopped him from making outrageous theological pronouncements! Consider this grandiose statement from his book Revolution! “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” (p. 112). Personally, I think Barna suffers from a guilty conscience. As mentioned last week, Barna was the driving force over two decades ago to get churches to go the user-friendly, seeker sensitive route by marketing the Church. As noted in *Christianity Today*, “Few people have made as many dramatic shifts in life as George Barna. He's moved from Boston to southern California, from a daily-Mass Catholic to a spokesman for evangelicals, from political pollster to leader of a media empire. Revolution signals another shift. Barna's early books (he's written more than 35) promoted Marketing the Church and The Power of Vision, so many perceived him as an ally of the megachurch. But in Revolution, his support for fluid movements and his direct challenge of a statement often used by Bill Hybels (“The local church is the hope of the world”) make him now seem a foe of the congregation.”³ Barna, however, is correct in many of his observations, especially the way that many seeker churches (like the ones he spawned) are superficial and shallow and contribute little if anything to the spiritual growth of those who attend. In this regard, he is justified in calling for a serious change. Pastors and church leaders who view themselves as C.E.O. and consider numbers as *the* determining factor of what constitutes success (along with embracing every fad that promotes growth) are a disgrace. But George Barna is dead wrong about the role the local church has in God's plan. He is dead wrong that Christians should embrace his model declaring the local church to be at best, optional. He is wrong that pastors and elders are unnecessary (and even a hindrance!). And he is dead wrong to think that a person is spiritually mature who has little or no connection to the local church. Barna is, in fact, simply following in the footsteps of Charles Finney. Mike Horton took note of this when he wrote: “This is finally where American spirituality leaves us: alone, surfing the Internet, casting about for coaches and teammates, trying to save ourselves from captivity to this present age by finding those ‘excitements’ that will induce a transformed life. Increasingly, the examples I have referred to are what people mean by the adjective ‘missional.’ Like the nineteenth-century revivalist Charles Finney, George Barna asserts that the Bible offers ‘almost no restrictions on structures and methods’ for the church. In fact, as we have seen, he does not even think that the visible church itself is divinely established. Nature abhors a vacuum and where Barna imagines that the Bible prescribes no particular structures or methods, the invisible hand of the market fills the void. He even recognizes that the shift from the institutional church to ‘alternative faith communities’ is largely due to market forces: ‘Whether you examine the changes in broadcasting, clothing, music, investing, or automobiles, producers of such consumables realize that Americans want control over their lives. The result has been the ‘niching’ of America—creating highly refined categories that serve smaller numbers

of people, but can command greater loyalty (and profits).’ The same thing is happening to the church, Barna notes, as if it were a fate to be embraced rather than an apostasy to be resisted. However thin, there is a theology behind Barna’s interpretation of Jesus as the paradigmatic ‘Revolutionary,’ and it is basically that of Finney. ‘So if you are a Revolutionary,’ says Barna, ‘it is because you have sensed and responded to God’s calling to be such an imitator of Christ. It is not a church’s responsibility to make you into this mold....The choice to become a revolutionary—and it is a choice—is a covenant you make with God alone.’ In this way, however, the work of the people displaces the work of God.”⁴

I. AN APOSTOLIC SUMMONS

The ‘Lone Ranger’ mentality advocated by Barna is completely foreign to the New Testament. “The individual Christian,” wrote the late Reformed Theologian J. A. Heyns, “is under the Authority of God’s Word, not merely as a church member, but in every department of his life, he is duty bound to give this salvation institutional form in the widest spheres of human society.”⁵

A. Our Duty as Christians: Consider One Another

“It is our duty,” wrote Westcott, “to declare what we are and what we look for: it is our duty also to consider what others are. The well-being of each believer is bound up with the well-being of the whole body. He is therefore constrained to give careful heed to others in the hope that he may rouse them to nobler action; and again that he may himself draw encouragement and inspiration from noble examples.”⁶ The word translated *consider* is the Greek word *Katanoōmen* and it means to give concentrated thought. Old Robert Traill noted, “The same apostle bids us *consider the Apostle and High Priest of our profession Christ Jesus*, (Heb. 3:1). That is a blessed consideration, with respect to patience in suffering: *Consider him that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds*, Heb. 12:3. As if the apostle would say, ‘If you would use to ponder how Christ was used in the world, and how many foul tongues were employed against him, ye would think little of all the contradictions you meet with.’ For one sinner to contradict another sinner, is no great matter; for a sinner to contradict a saint, no great matter neither: but for wicked sinners to contradict the Saviour, is the wonder. We are bid to consider ourselves, that *if any see another overtaken in a fault, we might restore such an one in the spirit of meekness, considering ourselves, lest we be also tempted*” (Gal. 6:1).⁷

B. A Cautionary Warning: Do Not Neglect Church!

The expression, *not neglecting to meet together* (The Greek word translated, “not neglecting” is *egkatalēiptes*, literally means “Not leaving behind, abandoning, to forsake), refers to the public worship of the Church and *NOT* private gatherings in a variety of social settings. “This means that no Christian can be an individualist. We *are* our brothers’ keeper. We must give thought to how we can be of help to other believers. We must consider the impact of our actions on the faith of others, encouraging them and taking a care that they are standing firm as the day of the Lord approaches.”⁸

CONCLUSION: In closing, listen once again to the words of Mike Horton: “The individualistic emphasis of evangelicalism stands in sharp contrast to the covenantal paradigm that we find in Scripture. We are commanded not to become self-feeders who mature beyond the nurture of the church, but to submit ourselves to the preaching, teaching, and oversight of those shepherds whom God has placed over us in Christ...Christ does not deliver us from one tyrant only to leave us weak and isolated prey to weather, wolves, and our own wanderings. ‘Obey your leaders and submit to them,’ Scriptures exhorts, ‘for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you’ (Heb. 13:17-18). Yet even this admonition is grounded in the gospel: submitting to the discipline of shepherds is an advantage to us because through it God promises all of his blessings in Christ. Let us

hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, *for he who promised is faithful*. And let us consider how to stir one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near (Heb. 10:23-25).”⁹

ENDNOTES

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- ¹ I cited this item last week from Barna’s book Revolution: Finding Faith Beyond The Walls of the Sanctuary (Tyndale, 2006). “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” (p. 39). Elsewhere he wrote, “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” (p. 8).
- ² This is how the Barna Website defines his work. “The Barna Group, Ltd. (which includes its research division, The Barna Research Group) is a private, non-partisan, for-profit organization that conducts primary research on a wide range of issues and products, produces resources pertaining to cultural change, leadership and spiritual development, and facilitates the healthy spiritual growth of leaders, children, families and Christian ministries. Located in Ventura, California, Barna has been conducting and analyzing primary research to understand cultural trends related to values, beliefs, attitudes and behaviors since 1984. If you would like to receive free e-mail notification of the release of each new, by-monthly update on the latest research findings from The Barna Group, you may subscribe to this free service at the Barna website (www.barna.org).”
- ³ http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/article_print.html?id=38097.
- ⁴ M. Horton, “No Church, No Problem,” Modern Reformation (July/August 2008) p. 18.
- ⁵ J. A. Heyns, The Church (NGKB, 1908) p. 190. He went on to add, “The Church is not an association of people with identical (religious) interest, still less an earthly waiting-room for Christ’s return. It is a properly equipped launching-pad for people who, like rockets, are fired into the world, to set it ablaze for the Kingdom’s sake. It is a properly organized military base, where troops are trained for their attack on the world and their conquest of it. It is God’s organized invasion of the world, where we see and hear the vanguard of his armies by which through the ages he would overcome and save a world sunk in sin. To put it in less sanguinary, more biblical terms: the Church is the officially institutionalized community of faith” (P. 191).
- ⁶ B. F. Westcott, The Epistle To The Hebrews (rpt. Eerdmans, 19973) p. 324.
- ⁷ The Works of Robert Traill III (rpt. Banner of Truth, 1975) p. 165.
- ⁸ Rick Phillips, Hebrews: Reformed Expository Commentary (P & R, 2006) p. 364.
- ⁹ Horton, op. cit. p. 20.