

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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THE IMPORTANCE OF THE CHURCH (PART 2)

In 1843, people sold their homes and businesses in anticipation of the imminent return of Christ. They were followers of William Miller, a self-taught Bible student from New York. Miller understood the 2,300 days of Daniel 8:14 to refer to the number of years until the return of Christ. Previously, scholars had agreed that this prophecy was fulfilled in the time of Antiochus Epiphanes. But Miller insisted that it would be fulfilled in his day. Despite the great excitement that Miller generated, March 21, 1844, came and went without the return of Christ. Miller was devastated, but one of his followers went back through the calculations and found what he believed to be an error. A new date was set: October 22, 1844. When October 1844 did not pan out, either, some of Miller's followers abandoned the movement. Many, however, tried to find a new explanation. They were too embarrassed to admit their error. They had invested too much to be wrong. Ellen G. White eventually founded the Seventh-day Adventists, leading them to the conclusion that Jesus had returned *invisibly* in 1844, and that he would soon make his presence known *visibly*. Another group that tried to hold to the 1844 date was led by Jonas Swendahl; they were known as the Second Adventists. They believed that 1844 marked the date, not of Jesus' return, but of the beginning of the last generation. Swendahl taught that Jesus would return in 1874. One of Swendahl's followers was a former Presbyterian named Charles Taze Russell. When 1874 came and went, Russell concluded that thirty years was not long enough for a generation. So he added seventy years to 1844 and concluded that Jesus would return in 1914. This and other differences led him to split from the Second Adventists and to launch Zion's Watchtower and Herald of Christ's Presence. His followers became known as the International Bible Students, and they went about the country with the message, 'Millions now living will never die!' His followers were to leave their churches and fellowship together. All churches were considered apostate, but God had supposedly provided a new channel for their instruction, Zion's Watchtower Tract Society. What began as the International Bible Students has, become the Jehovah's Witnesses. The date of 1914 was changed to 1925, then to 1941, and then to 1975. What began as calling Christians out of their churches to prepare for Christ's return became an anti-Christian cult. Fast forward to Harold Camping, who has gained international notoriety for predicting the date for the end of the world. Like Russell, he is now telling Christians to leave their churches. All the churches are apostate. You should no longer trust your pastors and elders. You should abandon them and turn to the true channel of God's Word, Family Radio. Like Jehovah's Witnesses, you should simply fellowship together and await word from Oakland. In these new fellowships, there is to be no discipline, no baptism, no communion, and no authority apart from Family Radio's interpretation of the Bible. Camping rejects I Corinthians 11:26, which says that we are to proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. He rejects Christ's clear teaching that the gates of Hades will not prevail against his church (Matthew 16:18). With even greater certainty than he had in 1994, Camping now tells us to abandon the elders whom Christ has provided to watch over our souls (Hebrews 13:17), to shepherd his flock (I Peter 5:1 - 3), and to feed his sheep (Acts 20:28 - 31). Do we no longer need shepherds other than Camping? Do we no longer need men to watch over our souls? Do we no longer need to be reconciled to our brothers (Matthew 18:15 - 17)? If we do, which church is to do the judging? Is Camping our pope, who will judge for us? Harold Camping may not be the Watchtower Tract and Bible Society, but he builds on the same wrongheaded interpretations of Scripture, the same date-setting, the same recalculations, the same accusations of universal apostasy, and the same claim to be the last true channel of God's Word. Despite the differences, both are heretical and schismatic, tearing apart Christ's church. We *do* live in a day of great apostasy. Churches do more than not resemble circuses and stage shows, but the church has *always* had these troubles. The church has also always had predators—incited by the ancient predator (Revelation 12:13)—who point out these problems in order to pry people away from the body of Christ and into their groups. Like the Jehovah's Witnesses, Harold Camping accuses anyone who disagrees with him of not really believing the Bible. He accuses them of making an idol of their church. The true idol here is Camping. Will Christians read the Bible for themselves

and search the Scriptures to know if these things are true, or will they blindly follow Camping into yet another false prophecy? And what will be the result for them if they do?¹ Sadly Camping's horrific folly is likewise being promoted along similar lines by the likes of George Barna. 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.² Barna, (like Camping) it should be noted, has *zero* theological training—and it shows in practically everything he writes. He is a pollster,³ 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. 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.”⁴ 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.”⁵

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.”⁶

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.”⁷ 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*, (Hebrews 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*, Hebrews 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” (Galatians 6:1).⁸

B. A Cautionary Warning: Do Not Neglect Church!

The expression, *not neglecting to meet together* (The Greek word translated, “not neglecting” is *egkatalieipontes*, 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.”⁹ Harold Camping tells Christians to forsake the local church. Like all false-teachers, Camping goes from error to error. Camping has been confronted by a large number of highly respected Reformed theologians like Jay Adams, Mike Horton, and R. C. Sproul and yet he remains stiff-necked and defiant. Those who remain stiff-necked are often given over to greater error, and such has proven to be the case with Camping. With some clever re-calculation, Camping then began to promote his thesis that 1994 *is* the correct date, not of the end of the world, but of the beginning of the Great Tribulation, which, according to Camping, is not characterized by a personal Antichrist and physical persecution of the true church, but universal apostasy, the reign of Satan in all churches in the world, and the end of “the Church Age.” Since 1994, therefore, God has abandoned the instituted church and salvation is no longer possible in the churches and congregations of the world, because God has removed His Holy Spirit and given the task of world evangelism (which for over 1950 years was entrusted to the church) to ministries like Family Radio. All this he has set for the in a book, *The End of the Church Age. . . and After*, published in 2002, ten years after his failed prophecy in 1992. With increasing boldness, Camping continues his attack on the instituted churches. In 2003 he published a book, *Wheat and Tares*, in which he claims that all those who remain in the churches and congregations in spite of Camping’s “gospel” to depart out of the churches are tares (unbelievers) and that God is gathering the wheat (elect believers) for harvest through the call of Camping’s “come-out-of-them” “gospel.” In his latest book, *Time Has An End, A Biblical History of the World 11,103 BC – 2011 AD* (published in 2005) he predicts that Christ will return in 2011. The rapture, he claims, will occur on 21 May, 2011, followed by 153 days of tribulation on earth for the unsaved, with the world ending on 21 October, 2011. Camping’s false eschatology also includes his denial of eternal punishment (contrast Matthew 25:46; Revelation 14:10 – 11). I have been asked why should we be interested in such an obvious fool as Harold Camping? Should we not dismiss him as completely irrelevant to the Reformed churches? Regrettably, we do not have that luxury. Harold Camping is a dangerous influence on church members all across the world. Although no statistics are available, many have forsaken instituted churches on his “authority.” Therefore, we do well to warn the people of God against false prophets like Camping (Deuteronomy 13:1 – 4; 18:20 – 22; Matthew 24:4) and to remind ourselves of our positive calling to be living, active members of true instituted churches; to seek out a true church if we are currently members of apostate or departing churches, or if we live in isolation from the true church, no matter what the cost.¹⁰

CONCLUSION: Whether its Camping’s cult or George Barna’s predicting future marketing trends, in each case people are being led to believe the local church is either apostate or irrelevant. 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 (Hebrews 10:23 - 25).”¹¹

ENDNOTES

¹ <http://www.christpres.net/2010/01/harold-campings-kingdom-hall.html>

² In Barna’s book *Revolution: Finding Faith Beyond The Walls of the Sanctuary* (Tyndale, 2006), he writes, “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).

³ 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).”

⁴ http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/article_print.html?id=38097.

⁵ M. Horton, “No Church, No Problem,” *Modern Reformation* (July/August 2008), p. 18.

⁶ 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).

⁷ B. F. Westcott, *The Epistle To The Hebrews* (rpt. Eerdmans, 1973) p. 324.

⁸ *The Works of Robert Traill III* (rpt. Banner of Truth, 1975), p. 165.

⁹ Rick Phillips, *Hebrews: Reformed Expository Commentary* (P & R, 2006), p. 364.

¹⁰ <http://www.cprf.co.uk/articles/campinorefuted.htm>

¹¹ Horton, op. cit., p. 20.