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Putting all the ecclesiastical corpses into one graveyard will not bring about a resurrection.

—D. MARTYN LLOYD-JONES

Faith is the soul of the Church; nothing is more proper to faith than agreement, nothing more contrary than sects.

—JOHN CALVIN

The way to the union of Christendom does not lie through committee-rooms . . . It lies through personal union with the Lord so deep and real as to be comparable with His union with the Father.

—WILLIAM TEMPLE

## A REVIEW ARTICLE

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*Deug Thompson*

### *THE SECOND COMING OF THE CHURCH— A BLUEPRINT FOR SURVIVAL*

George Barna

Nashville, Tennessee: Word Publishing (1998)

223 pages, cloth, \$18.99

One of the dustcover endorsements for this book states "This book . . . will probably alarm, anger or arouse you." It certainly had that effect on this reviewer . . . even before I opened it. I was startled by Barna's statement on the cover: "Today's church is incapable of responding to the present moral crisis. It must reinvent itself or face virtual oblivion by mid-21st century." Like some aging actress, the church must get a liturgical facelift and an evangelistic makeover if it is to revive its sagging career in the next millennium, and Christian sociologist George Barna purports to have just the cosmetics to do the job in *The Second Coming of the Church*.

In seeking to redirect the course of the church Barna makes the unflattering comparison of the church to a huge oil tanker on the high seas which takes more than a mile to make a U-turn. The ship, he insists, must put strenuous efforts into making this turn, or "we may run aground before we know what hit us" (p. 9). He begins his book with a barrage of statistics about the lukewarm condition of Christianity and its lack of impact upon society and cul-

ture. To profit at all from *The Second Coming of the Church*, the reader should make a distinction between Barna's data and his analysis of that data. The data is interesting and might spice up a sermon. The analysis, on the other hand, is severely flawed.

At the deepest level, the theological grid through which Barna interprets his findings is not rooted in the doctrines of the Reformation. He gives lip service to the sufficiency of the Scriptures, but in substituting secular theories for biblical principles, he treats the Word as woefully inadequate to meet the modern challenges facing the church. Statistics and current trends take on a canonical status while the Scriptures are lackluster in comparison. They are just too—well—old. Perhaps he gives a clue to his personal bibliology when he says, "We must be constantly sensitive to His guidance, which He gives to us through the Bible, experience, history, and *direct revelation*" (italics mine). So much for *Sola Scriptura*!

Much of his faulty analysis of the church and its problems stems from an inadequate understanding of the gospel, evangelism, and what constitutes a true believer. For example, Barna writes, "Jesus acknowledged that evangelizing the world is a huge undertaking. But He also encouraged His followers to persevere for the sake of the numerous people earnestly seeking God who simply do not know how to connect with Him" (p. 91). This thinking lies at the heart of Barna's seeker-friendly methodology which is why he sounds more like Charles Finney than the Apostle Paul who wrote, "There is none who seeks for God" (Rom. 3:11).

Barna's allowance of the category "carnal Christians" explains much of his dire assessment of the sad state of the church. He says that "many who make a decision never become true converts . . . they have merely taken the first step down the road of faith" (p. 93). But are they in fact on the narrow road that leads to life—or the wide road that

leads to destruction? In his chapter, "Thinking Like a Christian," he cites sad statistics about the beliefs and actions of what he calls born-again Christians:

"Two out of three born-again believers assert that there is no such thing as absolute moral truth. . . . Millions of Christians view transformation in Christ as a onetime solution to a 'crisis' rather than a lifelong 'process' . . . many believers stop growing in their faith" (p.123).

Is it possible that Barna wrongly defines a Christian? By making a separation between a convert and a disciple, Barna has fallen into the trap of creating an unbiblical category of Christians who never progress in the faith beyond the point of decision unless better follow-up techniques, more relevant worship, and programs inspired by felt needs keep these folks from leaving the church. A more plausible explanation is that many of these people are simply unregenerate. The solution is true evangelism.

This reviewer couldn't escape the distinct feeling that George Barna is embarrassed by the church and embarrassed by the gospel. Preaching is disparaged as an "archaic teaching style" and grossly insensitive to the shortened attention spans of moderns. Today's MTV generation thinks "mosiacally," he tells us, and is thus incapable of responding to a sermon based upon linear logic. Preachers need to communicate in this "mosaic" style, which seems to mean a short, snappy sermon of spiritual sound bites. It seems to me that the question to ask is not how this current generation thinks, but how God in His Word has spoken. If Paul utilizes linear logic in Romans, then the preacher must do the same. As the Second Commandment insinuates, if you tamper with the medium, you have tampered with the message.

The fact is, God Himself has appointed a foolish mes-

sage by which men will be saved—the gospel; and He has likewise appointed a foolish methodology by which the message is to be delivered—preaching. Are the seeker-friendly modifications to this time-tested medium really a veiled attempt to take the foolishness out of the gospel message? Do Barna and others really believe that a message of repentance from sin and faith in Christ can be made palatable and even entertaining to the natural man? George Barna seems to me to be a sincere Christian brother, but as John MacArthur entitled a book, he unwittingly seems to be *Ashamed of the Gospel*.

A good portion of the book is spent discussing a new paradigm for leadership. Barna admits that his inspiration comes from “research conducted by professional training companies” (p.154), and the works he cites as “the most helpful” on this topic are exclusively secular. This explains why Barna attaches such a high value to personality profiles for selecting and training leaders. “It is invaluable to incorporate some type of objective, market-tested resource to provide a leader with objective context about his or her standing as a leader” (p.162). Translated, “What’s your (leadership) sign?”

This somewhat astrological concept actually goes back far beyond Tim LaHaye’s *Transformed Temperaments* to Aristotle. But in all of Barna’s leadership criteria, where are the biblical standards of 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1? Perhaps they are absent because Barna is not dealing with biblical elder qualifications at all, but rather, envisioning ideal church leadership as a team of young, button-down-collar types, both men and women, who would fit in well in Silicon Valley.

Barna seems to actually be creating a nonbiblical category of leaders who are not required to possess the biblical qualifications. This is serious error. While he certainly emphasizes godly character, Barna omits the one nonchar-

acter quality required by Paul in the pastoral epistles—the elder must be “able to teach” and “able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict” (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:9).

Barna, on the other hand, goes to great lengths to make a distinction between the role of teaching and the role of leading. “I emphasize this point to emphasize that just because someone—say, a senior pastor—is a gifted teacher, that does not automatically make him a gifted leader.” Yes, God gifts elders differently, but *every* elder is to be a teacher. At the core of this lies the issue of biblical authority. Jesus is the head of His church and leads her to maturity and unity through His Word, taught by “pastors-teachers” (Eph. 4:12-16). There is no authority in the church apart from the Word, and a true teacher of God’s Word possesses *innate* authority. This is why I believe Paul forbade women the office of teaching, because it is impossible to separate the teaching of God’s Word from authority (1 Tim. 2:12). It is also why a man who is not gifted to feed the flock of God on His Word is unqualified for biblical leadership regardless of his ability to motivate and inspire. This might be the world’s criteria for leadership, but Jesus warned, “It is not to be so among you” (Matt. 20:26).

*The Second Coming of the Church* will no doubt be added to the bookshelves of many pastors who long to see their ministries grow, and who feel that the old paths must be abandoned in a rush to relevancy. But finite pastors are poor judges of what is “working.” God alone will reveal the fruit of our labors at the judgment seat of Christ. In the meantime, the wiser path is to follow Scripture over the statistics, to pursue preaching the Word and praying for the saints over pragmatic, seeker-driven experimentation. The problem with pragmatism in ministry is that it might yield immediate results that make it appear to be wildly successful, while the negative long-term effects only show up later.

Like spiritual Thalidomide, by the time the deformities in the spiritual children appear, the damage is done.

It is interesting to note that with Doug Murren and Steve Sjogren, George Barna was instrumental in forming a new denomination of churches aimed at baby boomers and younger generations called "Track One." Someone has called this "The Church of What's Happenin' Now." It is the first Christian denomination born out of polls and market research and committed to solely contemporary forms of worship and evangelism. So far there are about 100 Track One churches across the country with no common theology except the Apostles' Creed.

Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of Track One is its "death clause." Murren has vowed to shut the denomination down at the end of twenty years. He says: "The academics and seminarians are saying churches rarely if ever keep up peak performance more than 15 or 20 years. The pace of cultural change in the century ahead will magnify, and the likelihood of remaining relevant 25 or 30 years is zero" (*Seattle Times*, Oct. 18, 1998).

Ironically, Murren is right. When a church is driven by the ever-changing fads and whims of our culture, its obsolescence is guaranteed. I have to part company with the notable men who have endorsed *The Second Coming of the Church* as "a survival kit" for the church as it enters the next millennium. I believe that following its analysis will only hasten a church's descent into irrelevancy. How encouraging to know that in spite of our misguided efforts, Jesus' promise will hold true, "I will build My church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it."

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