

Revolting Developments?
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It seems to me that ecclesiology (the doctrine of the church) will be one of the greatest areas of theological challenge in the 21st century. What is the church? And who says so? Do we need the church? Who leads the church? Who is the church? And who is not?

In previous generations, these questions had shared-cultural answers within a certain amount of acceptable variation (ex. different polities). We now live, however, in post-Christendom times, and all of these ecclesiological questions are coming back around and being met with strange new answers.

In his recent book *Revolution* (Tyndale 2005), George Barna documents a shift occurring among Christians in North America. Self-identified Christ-followers are increasingly looking outside of the local church to meet their spiritual needs and to express their Christian identity. Barna calls these Christians “Revolutionaries” because he sees them as “spiritual champions” leading the charge on the “most significant recalibration of the American Christian body in more than a century” (pg. ix).

Based on his research, Barna believes that the local church in America has a losing record and that “revolution” is required. Most of the book is dedicated to spurring it on. It is here that I have to take issue. Barna not only reports on these (revolting?) developments, but he promotes them, as well. He apparently does not believe in the biblical basis for full participation in the local church—“Being part of a local church may facilitate [a right relationship with God and His people]. Or it might not” (pg. 37). In fact, Barna doesn’t believe that the Bible teaches a doctrine of the local church at all: “We should keep in mind that what we call ‘church’ is just one interpretation of how to develop and live a faith-centered life. We made it up. It may be healthy or helpful, but it is not sacrosanct” (pg. 38).

It may be that Barna is merely reacting to traditionalism, to institutions and buildings, to hierarchies, and to other a-biblical conventions that should be reevaluated in each generation according to biblical principles as the church continues her *semper reformanda* (always reforming) work. Barna does not make this clear, however, and his illustrations tell a different story. He not only parades stories of fresh ways of practicing the doctrine of the local church—new wine in new wineskins, but also of happily leaving the local church altogether.

Biblically speaking, this will not do. In the Bible, we have both copious description (ex. Acts) and extensive prescription (most epistles, especially 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus) for the local church. *To the degree that it matches up with the biblical design, the local church is sacrosanct.*

Most of what Barna says about “Revolutionaries” is commendable. They are people who do not just “go to church” but “are the church.” They are not content with the *status quo*. They want to really accomplish something for Christ in this world, not just play at it. Amen! But the Bible squarely places this kind of world changing action in the hands of “God's household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth” (1 Timothy 3:15).

Many will resonate with Barna’s *Revolution*. I have friends who are local church pastors who are excited by the ideas in this book! I couldn’t get too excited about it, however, because I have been falling in love more and more with the local church. I recommend Joshua Harris’ *Stop Dating the Church* (Multnomah 2004) as an antidote to the take-it-or-leave-it attitude that Barna promotes.

I have not seen many signs that the *Revolution* has yet come to West-Central Pennsylvania. We don’t have many instances of house-churches, organic churches, or emerging church forms yet in our communities. But we do have “local-church-less Christians.” In many cases, I believe their go-it-alone approach stems from fear, selfishness, and a desire to escape from accountability. I hope that an increased attention to God’s congregational designs in Holy Scripture will, instead of revolution, bring a vital reorientation to the local church.