

Review of George Barna, *Transforming Children into Spiritual Champions*

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Barna G 2003. *Transforming Children into Spiritual Champions*.
Ventura: Regal Books.

1. Introduction to the Author and the Book

George Barna is the directing leader of *The Barna Group*, a company in Ventura, California, that provides research and resources to Christian ministries. He is the best-selling author of more than thirty five books, several of which have received national awards. His other books include *Think Like Jesus*, *The Power of Vision*, and *The Frog in the Kettle*. Barna also publishes *The Barna Update*, a free bi-weekly research report available online at www.barna.org. He and his family live in Southern California.

No one can deny that modern culture is opposed to Christian values. The adverse influences that bombard the moral development of children today can be deadly. However, few parents and church leaders fully realise just how critical it is to initiate the development the child's biblical worldview, from an early age. The problem is complex, especially in light of the common circumstance of parents themselves not having received adequate (early) spiritual training. As a result, they often seem to leave their children's training and development solely to the church. Yet, the church generally focuses on older children, not realising that a child's moral development is set by the age of nine.

2. Summary of the Book

This book deals with one of the major problems faced by today's church: how can the church (and parents) help children cultivate a biblical worldview? In the simplest terms, cultivating a biblical worldview means learning to think and act like Jesus. But how can the church, that is, its members (including parents), teach children something their own parents didn't know how to teach them?

According to Barna (back cover), the answer is the following:

Churches must begin now to come alongside parents and equip them to provide their children – at the earliest age possible – with biblical precepts that will protect them from a barrage of worldly ideas and teaching that is hostile to the biblical worldview. Churches must also think in terms of providing parents with information and counseling that will equip parents to help their children become the spiritually mature Church of tomorrow.

Barna emphasizes that the time has come to wage a spiritual war—time to equip parents to help their children become the spiritually mature Church of tomorrow, literally transforming them into spiritual champions!

The book is divided into eight chapters.

1. The state of American children. In this first chapter, Barna uses four dimensions to describe the state and well-being of the American children, namely, intellectual, health / physical, economic, and emotional / behavioural.

2. The spiritual health of our children. This chapter deals with the following questions: Are all our decisions spiritually based? Do our

children really understand spiritual truths? What has the church have to do with it? Are we missing the mark?

3. *Why kids matter.* Here, Barna motivates why children matter. They matter, because: Children matter to God; Children matter to you and me; Children matter on the battlefield.

4. *What kids need.* Human development is a complex mixture of growth in five core areas: the moral, spiritual, physical, emotional, and intellectual dimensions of life. The basis of each of these is one's spiritual foundation. For example, a person's moral foundation is either based on Christian spirituality and God's Word, or, it is based on worldly perspectives. Our lives are played out on a battlefield. There are a variety of agents of influence that try to persuade us to adopt one particular approach to life over another. In this regard, children need our help with four p's: purpose, perspective, provision and performance.

5. *Taking on appropriate responsibility.* After dealing with the problem of the compliant church—the unbiblical and unhealthy dependence of families on the church for spiritually nurturing children—Barna clarifies the biblical responsibility of the family. The chapter describes the correct ways for a family to raise spiritual champions, and specifies the support that is available from the church.

6. *How churches help to raise spiritual champions.* This chapter examines how the church can be most effective in aiding parents in fulfilling their God-given responsibility to raise spiritual champions. It covers various perspectives on children's ministry, methods, and techniques that facilitate impact, curriculum content, and the people that help to make it happen.

7. *Better performance through evaluation.* In this chapter, Barna describes how parents can raise spiritual champions through the judicious use of continual evaluations relating to how well each child is developing spiritually. He answers the following questions: how do I measure progress? How do I know for sure that my child is a Christian?

8. *It's time to produce some spiritual champions.* This chapter serves as a motivation for timely action in children's ministry. Barna ends this final chapter with the advisory: 'May your household provide a nurturing environment of faith, love and spiritual growth so that the emerging generation of America's children will be all that their creator intends them to be' (137).

3. Strengths of the Book

3.1. It calls upon the Church to make children's ministry a priority

This is an excellent book that challenges and encourages parents and churches to partner together to mentor children from the earliest years of their lives. Barna admits that, for years, his own focus (and the focus of churches in general) has been on adults, despite the fact that eighty percent of those accepting Jesus as their Saviour, are below the age of thirteen years. In light of this, he appeals to churches to rethink their ministry priorities.

Many people who trust Jesus as their Saviour do so before the age of 15. Driven by this reality, George Barna invites us to the greatest harvest filed of all time – children. In *Transforming Children into Spiritual Champions*, he boldly and faithfully calls on churches to seize the opportunity to impact their communities – starting with the children (Jack D. Eggar²⁹).

²⁹ President and CEO, Awana Clubs International.

In *Transforming Children into Spiritual Champions*, George Barna reveals how we can be a vital part of the single most strategic ministry in God's kingdom, and in the process revolutionize life and faith in America. Without question every pastor must read this book (Steve Russo³⁰).

3.2. It helps the Church to fulfil its role in mentoring parents

Jim Burns³¹ articulates this point well:

The role of the church is to spiritually mentor parents; the role of the parent is to spiritually mentor the children; the legacy of faith continues from generation to generation. The theme of *Transforming Children into Spiritual Champions* is as old as the philosophy in the book of Deuteronomy and as fresh as today's newspaper. George Barna blends his incredible ability to research modern culture with his own passion to energize the spiritual life of children. It is a great book.

3.3. It is research-based and provides practical specifics on how to reach children more effectively

Barna is known for writing books based on superb research, and this book is no exception. Drawing from several national studies conducted among children, as well as others conducted among families and church pastors, this book challenges Christians to re-think their own assumptions and behaviour regarding the importance of ministry to children. Not only does the book give useful insights into the question, why focusing on substantive ministry to children is so critical, but it also offers some eye-opening information in the same, and provides

³⁰ Evangelist; author, *The seduction of our children*.

³¹ President, Youthbuilders.

guidance on reaching children more effectively. The last few chapters outline what churches can do to facilitate parents being more effective in transforming children, and how churches can assist parents, rather than replace them.

America's expert number cruncher [George Barna] has analysed the data and translated it into the most relevant work yet. Barna makes a compelling case that our hope for the future lies in our ability to help young people experience spiritual transformation (Tommy Barnett³²).

4. Weaknesses of the Book

4.1. The statistical data is rather sparse and it makes debatable conclusions

Although many applaud Barna for writing a book based on superb research, it may be argued that the statistical data is actually rather sparse. It may be argued further that the book serves largely as a forum for Barna to sermonize about ministering to children. Although Barna provides many valuable principles on children's ministry, his background suggests that he usually specialises in objective analytical research. However, this book does not appear to be a statistical analysis of the state of contemporary church ministries to children. In fact, only a few statistics are mentioned (and even repeated) throughout the book.

Barna has a reputation as a researcher, yet, he bases many of his conclusions on his thoughts and feelings as a father of young children, and not necessarily on solid research. And when he does reference the research, he makes ambitious logical leaps, by reaching debatable and

³² Pastor, Phoenix First Assembly of God.

sweeping conclusions. In addition, the charts presented in the book are not always adequately explained, leaving one longing for more thorough elucidation of them.

4.2. The claim that children's ministry should be the primary focus of the Church

The sub-title of the book is what the book is essentially about, namely, why children should be your church's # 1 priority. Although the sentiment that the churches should make ministry to children *one of the* primary focal points is something worth articulating, it is rather over emphasised by Barna. To suggest that children's ministries should be elevated above all others seems rather dramatic, a suggestion that is simply not well vindicated in the book.

4.3. Lacks details on what specific churches have done

Although Barna's general description of what effective churches are doing is compelling, possibly causing pastors who read the book to consider the various strategies presented, it non-the-less lacks useful detail. The accounts of successful implementations of children's ministry strategies by churches are unfortunately presented in general platitudes. It may be difficult to disagree with such generalities, but conversely, it is also less instructive to the reader.

5. Conclusion

Despite its shortcomings, Barna's book presents a timely challenge and welcome corrective to church leaders to embrace the importance of children's ministry. His insightful commentary, statistical analysis, and

vision for success, are inspiring, providing great direction for children's ministry in churches.

In some ways, it is a disturbing book - the spiritual state of children, as described, is frightening. However, it is a very helpful, practical, and necessary book. Every parent and pastor should read it.

Reference List

- Amazon.com 2011. Online book reviews: <http://www.amazon.com/Transforming-Children-Into-Spiritual-Champions/dp/0830732934>, 2011-03-24.
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