

Barna, George. The Frog in the Kettle. Ventura, CA: Regal, 1990.

Book Review By:

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SUMMARY

The Frog in the Kettle, written in 1990, is a futuristic look at the transforming culture in which the Church finds itself in the year 2000. After accumulating data on the changing landscape of America, George Barna not only describes the looming future, but also he enlightens the Church on how to respond to the significant shift in culture. Barna does a masterful job of describing many different aspects of the future while also consistently providing specific ways in which the Church should react.

Barna begins with a narrative about “Jill,” a single mother with a live-in boyfriend. Jill has a job that pays well and seems to have everything she needs for happiness, yet for some reason she is unfulfilled. Although Jill was raised in church, she has not attended one in years and sees no need of beginning now. This imaginary tale of Jill is all too familiar in the changing landscape of the turning century. Jill’s story is one that the Church needs to examine, because she is one type of the new American the twenty-first century Church will be attempting to reach.

After providing an example of America’s future, Barna explains the need for the Church to begin anticipating the impending change. For far too long, the American Church has looked for large changes while overlooking minimal changes within society.

Like the “frog in the kettle,” the Church is beginning to be burned by a slow change in cultural temperature. Instead of the Church changing the surrounding culture, the reverse is true. Secularism and materialism have impacted the country so profoundly that the country and the Church have lost much of their spirituality. In view of such events, it is time for the Church to anticipate the future and be more relevant to the new culture and its people, such as Jill.

The second part of the book, consisting of chapters two through six, investigates particular behavioral and lifestyle changes and how they will affect the Church. There are certain demands of the changing culture that will consequently affect the values of the Church. While there is an emphasis on materialism, there is a de-emphasis on commitment. Also, individuals are more skeptical, particularly of organizations like the Church, and traditions are seen as unimportant. In view of these and other changing values, Barna provides certain reactions that the Church must take such as optimizing people’s involvement and developing new traditions.

Another change in behaviors and lifestyles is the new methods of information. The future holds an enormous increase of a wealth of information that will come in many different forms. Historically, churches are late at accepting information. To impact this rapidly changing culture, the Church will need to embrace and implement technology to show that it is relevant.

Barna next turns his attention to the changing landscape of the American family. Individual interests are beginning to supersede family interests contributing to a shift in the traditional family unit. While marriages are being threatened and families are spending less time together, Americans are yearning for more friendships. The Church

must help reshape families and friendships by providing insight into God's design for the family structure and responding to America's problem of loneliness.

Americans are also experiencing a cultural shift in terms of leisure time, an area that is becoming highly influential in people's lifestyles. More money and time are being spent on leisure than at any other time in history. Leisure time is even providing significance to the lives of many individuals. People are attempting to establish relationships through recreation and to engage in activism through free time. While America is attempting to fill their time with recreation, the Church must compete for people's time and attention.

The final change in behaviors and lifestyles that Barna examines is the change in the area of economics. People are changing jobs and careers more frequently, and more women are entering and remaining in the workforce. Niche marketing, a practice needed in the Church, and business ethics, a practice affecting the credibility of the Church, are also entering the mainstream. Churches will need to train people concerning the priority and the process of tithing.

In part three, Barna observes certain changes taking place in the area of faith. Two chapters—chapters seven and eight—are written concerning this aspect of the changing culture. The first chapter discusses the rapid transformation in religious beliefs. Although most Americans are consistently exposed to religion, they are becoming unaffected by their exposure. Individuals are not engaging in Christian practices and are not involved in the Church, prayer, or individual or corporate Bible study. Many Americans believe that the Church is not relevant, and they are becoming more syncretistic and relativistic. The Church must find new, exciting, and substantive

ways to engage a changing culture. Concerning the Church, many individuals are less loyal to religion. People are not committing to churches, and the churches are losing their influence on society. Also, churches are not actively engaging in evangelism and attempting to reach the changing culture.

Part four chronicles the change in attitudes and perceptions of people. The major goal of people in the coming future is personal happiness. Low self-esteem is a dominant feature of society, and happiness is viewed as a passing sensation. Also, there is a prevalent “me-first” attitude concerning every area of life, including relationships. In view of this, Christians must exhibit the Christian life and principles and provide answers to the emptiness that many are experiencing.

Another change in attitudes concerns the issue of authority. People have problems with authority, especially concerning institutions like the Church and corporations. Therefore, the Church must maintain integrity while also shifting from being viewed as an institution. Also, as lawsuits increase, the Church must be prepared.

The next three chapters fall into the fifth category, which explores certain aspects of population changes. As the native born population experiences little growth, immigrants will provide tremendous growth and change to the landscape of America. The number of minorities will continue rising indicating that the world is coming to America. Also, people are moving to the southern half of the U.S. and into metropolitan areas.

As Baby Boomers determine the course of America, the American population will be equally distributed among the various age categories. Senior citizens are growing more than any other population segment, while the number of youth is deteriorating.

The Church must reexamine ministry to the elderly and to youth. Churches will also need to address the issue of the changing landscape of the educational and economic aspects of America. There is a growing divide between the rich and poor, and the Church must not overlook the poor while catering to the rich.

The final section of the book provides ten creative responses for the Church to the transforming environment of America. These responses are necessary for the Church to recapture the spirituality of America and to be viewed as relevant by culture. Barna closes by providing an alternate approach to the introductory narrative of “Jill.” The alternate approach is one that has a local church engaging Jill, thereby creating changes in every area of her life, one that is now fulfilled.

Evaluation

BIBLICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

While the book is extremely valuable for churches, it makes little to no biblical contribution. There are no biblical references cited within the book, although there are certain allusions to many biblical principles and truths. It is obvious that Barna knows the biblical principles and more than likely works from a place of assumption on the part of the reader regarding spiritual knowledge. Barna’s understanding of the role of the Church is certainly biblical, but he makes his arguments and assertions from a statistical and sociological viewpoint. The book is supported by biblical principles, while the statistical findings and the suggested response of the Church are viewed through the author’s biblically conscious perspective and worldview.

THEOLOGICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

The major theological contribution of the book concerns the doctrine of the Church. There are no other major theological issues discussed in the book. It is merely a futuristic approach to the changing culture. Barna does offer some helpful insight into the role of the Church. While not explicitly providing theological statements concerning the Church, he provides certain theological principles. He depicts a Church that is actively engaged in the surrounding culture. Barna's characterization of Church is one that attempts to be relevant to a changing environment while maintaining biblical fidelity. He also provides sound arguments to support his viewpoints and gives practical responses for the Church to actively engage their environment.

MISSIOLOGICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

While the strengths of this book are not in biblical and theological contributions, the missiological contributions are tremendous. Every church should read this book and seek to implement some of the ideas and strategies provided by Barna. He not only does a terrific job of describing the future culture shift, but also he offers many principles and strategies for the Church to respond to the unavoidable culture shift. This book encourages the Church to anticipate certain changes and to actively connect with the rapidly changing society. Historically, the Church has been strictly reactionary to certain changes, but Barna exhorts believers to foresee change and establish responses beforehand. Barna describes two vastly different churches: one that is relevant to culture and one that is distant from culture. He implores believers to see the need to be relevant. The twenty-first century is rapidly changing, and unless the Church becomes

relevant it will be less influential. The Church should be changing culture instead of being changed by culture. To change culture, the Church must be relevant to culture, and to be relevant to culture, the Church must adapt with the transforming world and reach it where it is.