

The Reshaping of the Faith in the U.S.

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George Barna's recent book, *The Seven Faith Tribes*, suggests a new paradigm for categorizing faith in America [casual Christians, captive Christians, Jews, Mormons, Muslims, pantheists, and skeptics]. Whether his description of "faith" will have a long-term impact on how we think about religion remains to be seen, given the fact that he includes several non-Christian groups. Nonetheless, some of his initial observations are helpful.¹

In our national culture, we have gradually shifted our energy from a desire and willingness to work hard to achieve significant outcomes, to an attitude of entitlement. Nowhere has this change had more disastrous results than in our perceptions of the role and expectations of religion. We expect accumulation and blessings; we expect leisure time. We see church as one way we spend our leisure time, and thus we expect refreshment and recreation from our religious experiences. We expect the secular market, and the religious market, to meet our needs in customized and personalized ways. This has produced a fragmented market, perhaps nowhere more obvious at the beginning of 2009 than in the U.S. car manufacturers who are being overwhelmed by their effort to see how many different kinds of cars they can manufacture to please increasingly small segments of consumers. Our culture has transitioned from a commitment to the common good based on shared values to an emphasis on personal good and individual values.

In the midst of such transitions, our religious communities have not kept up. Some have refused to adapt. Rather than facilitate commitments to positive, life-affirming values, service to others, and balanced moral lives, churches and larger ministries have fallen prey to the competitive spirit of the American system. Churches are competing for bodies, dollars and talent, rather than upholding core values.² When the religious communities have failed in their role of moral and spiritual leadership, we have turned to the political and business sectors for values cues. The bar has been significantly lowered—less character, less vision, more individualism. "Unity in the midst of diversity" has been exchanged for "extreme individualism in the midst of competition," seeing who can have the most creature comforts and the greatest power/supremacy.

According to Barna, these and other changes have resulted in five major problems which have an impact both in the U.S. culture and in the context of many local churches and faith communities. Many faith communities, at least in the problem areas identified, are little different than the culture we are trying to influence. Too often, the culture is influencing the churches more than the churches are influencing the culture.

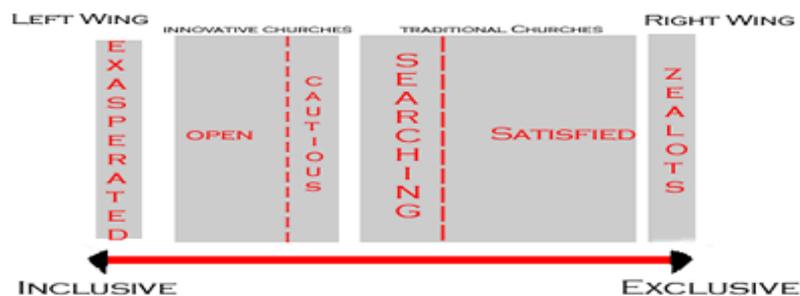
¹ The following paragraphs set off as quotes include a summary of some of his findings along with some of my own reflections or reactions.

² The importance and identification of core Christian values was the topic explored in the adult Bible classes at the McAlester church: truth, unity, service, obedience, purpose, compassion, responsibility, accountability, and community. The study series of vision, mission, and values is available at the church website: www.mainandoklahomacofc.org.

- Absence of a shared vision for the future
- Value confusion leading to inability to make appropriate decisions
- Elimination of community and loss of a sense of common good
- Deterioration of respectful dialogue and fruitful exchange of competing ideas
- Abandonment of moral character and personal decency

Throughout history, religion has been constantly shaped and reshaped with various groups and sub-groups. Fairly early in Christian history, Catholicism divided into eastern and western groups—Orthodox and Roman (Eastern and Western). In the Reformation, (Roman) Catholicism was opposed by Christian reformers.³ That we may be on the cusp of yet another restructuring of basic Christian groupings is clearly possible, but the exact nature of the alliances and which groups will recognize which other groups is not yet clear. What is clear is that the previous ways of thinking about Christianity and Christian groups is going away. Well-defined doctrinal distinctions are giving way to new commitments based on certain practices or methods. In the middle of the last century, a tract popular among churches of Christ summarized the religious options as Protestant, Catholic, Jew, and “us”. While this paradigm was, at the time, an interesting approach that caught the attention of many and uniquely positioned us outside the typical religious understandings (now hardly more than an intriguing part of history), the division is hardly valid today as we have seen the multiplication (or explosion) of groups that are neither Protestant, Catholic, nor Jew. The paradigm is much less helpful in defining or distinguishing Christian groups at the beginning of the 21st century. At the beginning of the 21st century, one might mention at least the following groups within Christianity: denominationalists, Pentecostals, Restorationists, community churches, independent faith communities, and sects and cults. Based on method, one might mention the house church movement (SIMPLE churches, cell churches, etc.) which develops groups that accept or recognize one another based on methodology. The same thing could be observed, but to a lesser extent, in the church planting movement (CPM) or Emergent church movement. Indeed, “The times, they are a-changin’.”

A few years ago, Joe Beam suggested a model to explain the situation in churches of Christ.⁴



Now George Barna, asking a similar question about the structures and divisions within U.S. religion generally, suggests a new paradigm to explain new religious segments or groupings.

³ Within the Reformation were several leaders and groups—Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, spiritualists, Anabaptists, Anglicans. There was also a Catholic Reformation.

⁴ At the time of this writing, more complete explanations of the chart which is included are available at the website: www.gracecentered.com/whatishappening.htm.

Analyzing Barna's seven faith segments, I see four basic religious groups in the U.S., two of which are Christian, all of which need to be reached afresh with the gospel, but in different ways with different means.

Four Basic Religious Segments?

A few years ago (2003), the local newspaper in the community where I was ministering undertook a research project designed to understand church participation in the community. They identified the 10 largest religious groups, with a combined average attendance (not membership) of about 2300. The 10th largest group (out of 31 groups) had a weekly average attendance of 50. If one were to consider the additional 20 groups with an average attendance of 50, such would represent no more than another 1000 people attending church. Thus, in this southeastern Oklahoma community of about 18000, approximately 3000 were attending church on any given Sunday in 2003, according to the article. Anecdotal evidence, asking this question in various contexts across the U.S., suggests to me that on any given Sunday in our nation, no more than 15-20% of the population attends church. A general description from church growth studies 20-25 years ago suggested that one-third of the U.S. population was churched, one-third minimally churched, and one-third unchurched.⁵

Thus, one might describe the research done by Barna in the following way, thinking of four basic religious segments.

- Committed Christians, 15%
- Casual/nominal Christians, 66%
- Other religions, 6-7%
[Jews, 2%; Mormons; 2%, Muslims, <1%; Pantheists/eastern religions, 2%]
- Skeptics-agnostics, atheists, 11%⁶

In the remainder of this article, I want to think about the first two groups. This is not to deny that the church must be aware of those outside the larger "Christian circle" and consider how these can be reached effectively. This effort is certainly worth our thought and consideration, given that outside the U.S. the percentage of the population in the "other religions" group increases significantly. In the cultural context of the U.S., however, the overwhelming majority of those whom Christians encounter daily are part of the first two groups, perhaps 90% or more of those we encounter in normal social patterns.

⁵ The standard for churched in this description was church attendance at least once a month, the standard for minimally churched was attendance at church less than once a month. This suggests that during the 1980s, church attendance in the U.S. on any given Sunday was likely no more than 25-30%, given the low standard used to define those who were churched.

⁶ This description is also generally consistent with the recent studies that suggest 15% of the U.S. population has no religion (although Barna's number is only 11%).

It is important that we understand that between two-thirds and three-fourths of those we encounter daily are essentially unchurched, connected only casually or nominally with a faith community. This does not mean that they are not spiritual, or even religious, but only that they are not practicing that faith in the context of a community. Also, one must distinguish between the strength of any connection to a church, and the strength of the accepted belief system. I have met people who did not attend church at all or were only minimally connected to a faith community who would argue vehemently for a certain doctrinal position which had been part of their upbringing or the faith system of their parents or family. Given the current cultural situation, the way in which we approach evangelism must shift, away from attempts to bring people to Jesus based on purely mental factors, toward bringing people into the Christian community holistically—taking into account the teaching of Scripture, relationships, and practical lifestyle issues. This is doubly important, given our society’s post-modern relativism that fails to identify objective truth as either possible or relevant. As a result, the way in which we are going to touch others with the gospel is changed.

Without ceasing to recognize the importance of the word of God as our guide, both in Bible classes and preaching, we must seek to understand where and why the gospel is relevant in lives of our friends and neighbors, given the nature of the world in which we live. We must redouble our efforts to touch people outside normal “religious” contexts. We must seek and establish social relationships and friendship bridges which can serve as conduits for gospel conversations (initially, not studies, but conversations).

This calls the church to rethink its life—what we do in worship, in our classes (so those classes are accepting of visitors and capable of assimilating ‘outsiders’), in our fellowship, through small groups, specialty classes, “come and see” events, and a host of other things that the church might do in its effort to be the genuine church and to reach out to a lost world.

May God help us as we do this kind of “missional” thinking!