

Book Review

Barna Group,
*Barna Trends 2018: What's New and What's Next
at the Intersection of Faith and Culture.*
Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books. 2017.

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Barna Trends 2018 is a sociological glimpse of the thoughts of Americans, analyzed through a Christian lens that leans toward Evangelical. It is a survey of what the respondents think about in three general categories of culture, life and faith. The section on culture includes a look at media, politics, and perspectives. The Life section includes vocation and education, habits, relationships, and community. The last section is Faith and it covers practices, church, beliefs, leadership, global religion, and then ends on the State of the Church in 2018. These are wide topics that span the church, community, family life, and national concerns.

The look and the feel of the book is designed in a way that welcomes readers who may not often find themselves reading social research data. However, this is not an esoteric, data-heavy book of percentages and graphs. This is meant to be used by a wider audience of readers. The layout and content are designed to tell a larger story beyond the numbers. Sprinkled within the statistics and infographs are stories and narratives from ministers, professors, and other church leaders such as Latasha Morrison, John Perkins and Andy Crouch. Their thoughts and pictures remind the reader that the trends are made up of individuals and that the numbers

represented have human implications behind them and humans who respond to these trends in their own contexts.

The Barna Group's mission is to provide information for who they call "spiritual influencers" with knowledge of the trends happening amongst Christians in the U.S. The term "spiritual influencers" evokes the social media term "social influencers", indicating someone with a large social media following and the ability to shape their thoughts and presumably purchasing habits. In the case of Barna, it seems that "spiritual influencers" indicates church leaders who may be pastors, but could also be small group leaders, Sunday school teachers, youth pastors, professors or other people in similar teaching or leading positions. It also serves as a macro-level survey for those considering church planting. Church planters and start-up organizations could use the national data as a source of comparison to local community findings. It is a book with soundbites of thoughts and opinions, meant to provoke conversations around the topics at hand.

As with other statistical data, the temptation might be to search for data that supports something the reader has already formed an opinion around. Barna Trends may be helpful in this situation, however it can also be useful in contemplating the larger social issues that the

study represents. For instance, in the opinions around President Trump, it might be helpful to look at the data from new perspectives that involve deeper questions around what it means to be evangelical or white or a person of color, rather than simply plugging in statistics that support political party line rhetoric. The methodology used for gathering data strove to be diverse and balanced in its reporting. If the reader can trust the methods used for this study, then using the book's analysis as a tool to ask questions behind the questions might be one approach for how to use this book in creative and conversation generating ways.

The study is a survey of what people think about things. This is different from other kinds of statistical data. For instance, there is a survey about what people think about police brutality. This is distinctly different from statistics about the number of incidents related to police brutality. The methodology for gathering data is just as important as the methodology in which the data is used. There is a fine line between discussing what people think about an issue and discussing the issue itself. The book lends itself to laying the groundwork for discussions and thoughts about the issues themselves because the statistics gathered are people's opinions about the topics. Small groups discussing current events or social issues can use the polls as starter points.

Barna does some of this work for the reader by taking their data a little deeper. For example, the Editor in Chief, Roxanne Stone, takes the data on women in leadership (73) and pushes the conversation toward an examination of not only Evangelicals, but all Americans and their views on gender parity. The book also has Q&A sections where Church thinkers (pastors, practitioners, professors) take the Barna data and weave them into practical thoughts on what

that means for the church. In one of these Q&A sections, Sharon Galgay Ketcham, associate professor of theology and Christian ministries, shares her thoughts on the data about what parents of teens are concerned about today. In another Q&A, Mark DeYmaz, founding pastor of Mosaic church in Arkansas, shares his thoughts on multicultural ministry as a gospel mandate.

The topics of multiculturalism, tribalism, race relations, and immigration are all represented in this book, but it still seems like more could be said in further volumes or studies about each topic individually, given the national rhetoric around these issues. It leaves the reader wanting more information, which may be a part of the function of the way the data is presented. For some of the topics, there are pages that direct the reader to further studies online at the Barna website.

Another area that could use more focus in the coming editions could be a look at the widening gap between the two-party political system in the U.S. and the effects of that gap between evangelical and progressive churches. Research in the area of the political divides and the correlation among American church people might help bring better understanding across the party lines.

The book is similar to other social science research such as the studies done by Pew Research Institute, but the Barna Trends books seem to be packaged in a way that most church laypeople and clergy can use in a compact, all-in-one, and readily accessible way. The statistics are shaped within narratives and packaged into brief bites of useful information.

Barna Trends provides information for today's spiritual influencers, but also serves as a time-capsule because of its focus on current events and trends. Years from now, a reader will

be able to see a sample picture of the political and cultural climate in the United States in 2018. While the book is situated in a particular time frame, its use spans past, present, and future. The book helps future researchers understand the climate of 2018 when looking to the past, helps the church consider the issues the church faces in the present, and informs church leaders to cast visions for the future.

