

Please Note that this transcription was prepared automatically by a third party. Please excuse any typos or incorrect timestamps and reach out to podcasts@awana.org with any questions.

SPEAKERS

RC: Ross Cochran

GB: Dr. George Barna

MM: Matt Markins

0:00:09.0 RC: This is the Resilient to Disciples Podcast, powered by Awana. I'm Ross Cochran. Thank you for listening. We are back for the start of Season 3, kind of at least! We'll pop up a few times, between now and August 5th when we'll be back with weekly episodes, but I had to come to you today because today you'll hear from Dr. George Barna, as well as a water President and Chief Strategy Officer, Matt Markins. George Barna has filled executive roles in politics, marketing, advertising, media development, research and ministry, he founded the Barna Research Group in 1984, now known as the Barna Group, and helped it become a leading marketing research firm focused on the intersection of faith in culture, before he sold it in 2009. We started the conversation with Dr. Barna, sharing what stands out to him about this current generation of kids, what makes them unique and how we can best disciple them given the unique challenges that they face. Thanks for listening to The Resilient Disciples Podcast!

0:01:33.5 GB: Well, I think one of the biggest issues has to do with world view. They're growing up in a nation and in households where it's extremely unlikely that anybody in the household has a biblical worldview, and when you take that out of the equation, what that essentially means is that everything is up for grabs, there are no absolutes of any type, and therefore every decision they make is in the minds of the parenting generation as well as the per-generation of today's kids. Everything is defensible, there are no rights and wrongs, and when you start from that place in life, it's very difficult to ever get to a place where you can accept, for instance, the Bible as truth, where you would, for instance, except the principles and commands, and example of Jesus Christ, as something that ought to be the model for your life, where for instance, you might talk about God as be not only the creator but the center of everyone's life. Those concepts make no sense to a world in which there are no absolutes, there are no documents that should give you a firm foundation on which to build. There are no kinds of restrictions, limitations, boundaries that a person needs to recognize if it doesn't feel right, because everything is driven by emotion.

0:02:59.3 RC: Wow, I wanted to start there because I think what that speaks to is a tension that most of our listeners feel, but you, like you do in so much of your work, we're able to put words to it that I think are really helpful for folks, because I think when people have that person, that child who's part of their ministry that they can't quite connect with, and it just feels like they're in two different realities. What you're saying is essentially that they are! And to start from that place, when you're trying to work with them I think it's such...

0:03:20.3 MM: So crucial, I'd like to go back to the last thing you said there, George, on

kind of the secular creation... What is the framework that today's child is living in? You mentioned if it doesn't feel good, it... That's almost like the sin into a secular world, what are the other things that you would describe in makeup, if there's a creed for the secular culture or the post-Christian culture, what would be those key pieces of the framework?

0:03:58.8 GB: One of them has to do with the idea of success. What is success? Of course, to someone who loves Christ, wants to be biblical in how they live, success is consistent obedience to God in our culture, success is feeling good about yourself, having the freedom to do whatever you wanna do, however you wanna do it. Whenever you wanna do it, it has to do with your sense of self and being able to play that out however you wish... The context in which kids are growing up in our culture is one where a Christian would look at history as the unfolding of God's plan to fulfill his purposes, but in our culture, we look at history as a human narrative that can always be edited because it's imperfect in our culture, people look at themselves as the center of their reality, a biblical Christian, we look at God as the center of reality, we are here simply to honor and relate to Him. When you think about something like life, purpose, in a Christian context, our purpose is to know love and serve God with all our heart, mind and soul, but in our cultural context, our purpose is to experience happiness, enjoyment and success. In a Christian context, we think about truth as something that emanates from the very character of God, and that He has defined true for us in His word, in our culture, however, we believe that there is no such thing as absolute moral truth, the individual is the only one who can identify true for him or herself, it changes according to the circumstances, and nobody can question your perception of truth, they have to accept it because it's your truth, and they're gonna have their truth, but you can't challenge their truth because it's their truth. So you start to put all this together and it really is two different universes, and trying to figure out how do we bridge that? We can even throw salvation into that mix. You know what happens after you die? And we know that only 2% of Americans believe that they're gonna go to hell. So 98% believe that there's gonna be some kind of existence after they die here on earth, and yet only 30% believe that they're gonna go to heaven only because they've confessed their sins and they have accepted Jesus Christ as their Savior. So that means about two out of three Americans believe that they're gonna have some kind of a positive existence after this life is done. That's gonna have nothing to do with God. So it's a really interesting time to be like... The way you describe that there, you know what... What's helping to contribute toward the framework of the culture that we're swimming in with personal happiness and how I experience my own truth. A lot of this is driven by emotion. As we've studied this, it looks like what we're understanding is that the center of all of that is this idea of personal autonomy or hyper-individualization that I get to experience the world with me at the center, and I think you strive at it away, it's very consistent with what we see and what we're interpreting as well, but I'm gonna go back to some of your work and that was published in 2004-2005 because it helped contribute significantly to the conversation that the children's ministry and child discipleship community is even doing today.

0:07:53.7 MM: I think some of your work was a catalyst in a spark to what we call the modern day family ministry movement, which I would say is connected to the larger discipleship or disciple-making movement. Can you talk to us about what led up to the

publishing of your work, transforming children into spiritual champions? Why did you go into that space?

0:09:22.2 GB: Yeah, it's a little embarrassing actually to talk about because at that point in time, when our company was doing was trying to help church leaders to understand the culture, not to accommodate it, but to be able to challenge it biblically and to bring new ways of thinking to people who are moving into the kind of mindset that we've just been talking about, and so we had been doing seminars for probably a decade at that point, and the process-wise, and we would spend two or three years doing research... I go out on the road with my family for about 18 months, we do seminars in between 100 to 200 cities across the country, invite pastors from all the churches within 10 mile radius of where we were, and then we'd spend the day download the information and ideas and strategies for better ministry. Well, having done that for a decade, we've blown through all the usual topics, discipleship, worship evangelism, a service, building community. You just talk about all the stuff. We've already been through it, and so we were sitting in our office one day trying to figure out, Okay, what are we gonna do in our next seminar series, and we identified three different topics and we're sitting around... Batting around topics, and one of the women in the room said, Hey, you know, we've never done anything on ministry to children. And I looked at her and I laughed and I said, Well, no, we haven't. Why wouldn't we do... She was kind of taking it back and everybody in the room look at me, side went about dating around more topics, and I don't know, 10, 15, 20 minutes later I got back and I say, You know, that thing that you said about children that's bugging me. Now, we've talked about teenagers, we've talked about young Italy, we've talked about college students, we've done all these other people groups, blacks, Hispanics, etcetera, and we've done research on all that. Why haven't we looked at children... Maybe there's something there, I don't know. I've never even thought about it. Typical Christian. So we went out, we did the research, and it blew my mind because I learned so much about the importance of ministering to children. I have to say it's one of the two or three things I've done over the last 40 plus years that have completely revolutionized the way that I think about ministry, and the way that I think about impact on people's lives, and so we went out and that was one of the sessions that we did, and in the book that you alluded to, transforming children into spiritual champions came out of that research, and then the year and a half that we spent on the road interacting with pastors, and I have to say when we did that... That road tour. That road trip. One of the things that fascinated me was we actually had to switch around the order of the topics because we went into it in the early cities where we were doing that to her, me thinking, we're gonna leave this for last because this is the most important thing, 'cause now my mind has been completely changed about the importance of Children's Ministry, and what we found was that in the early markets where we had it forth, because we thought, here's the big aha moment, most of the pastors left before we got to that... Because they had the same mindset I have before I did the research, which is, What do I care about children? Ministry is about adults. Now, fill in the church with adults is success, and that's still the mentality in America today, but... So we changed around the order of the sessions, we actually put it right before lunch, you wanna lose me after lunch? I didn't wanna lose him at the end of the day, I foretell made the highlight session to session two, we'll do a session one on trans or whatever, and then we'll do number two, we'll talk

about children's ministry, and I had so many pastors who were so upset, that came up to me and said, Why are you wasting my time? Do you know And I said, Why are you wasting my time with this question? Are you listening to what I'm talking about here? This is the single most important thing you can take out of the stack, so I made a lot of enemies on that tour, but it was worth it, I mean, you gotta shake up.

0:13:32.8 MM: You may have made some enemies, but I know one demographic where you gained a lot of friends and you empower... And I can't be the only person to have shared this with you, but I've spent 20 years of my non-profit ministry career, not in the church, but outside of your parachute, and you gave voice to those who work with children in a big and powerful way. There was a collective sigh when that book published and when we... I was a part of launching d6, you were actually one of our first communicators, and we didn't even have our own book, we took your book out on the road, and we helped really bring that community together, so thank you for that work, it's just really empowering to those who advocate for child discipleship...

0:14:37.1 GB: Well, that was an honor for me to do that. Looking back over the course of the fall all the years and I've been able to do research and you know, communicate things about our culture and the church to people, that certainly has to be one of the highlights for me, has been having the privilege to do that and to know that there were a lot of people that read that or heard that, and it was a wake up call for a lot of people and for others, it was, as you were saying, an empowering moment where it's like, Praise the Lord, I'm not alone in thinking that children really matter and we really need to invest handily in them, in to this day, I only talk about a few things. When I go out now, I'm not interested in covering the waterfront anymore, I wanna spend my last year as finishing well, and as I try to figure out what does that mean? Well, it's predominantly talking to people about world view, and in the course of that, they have to understand that a person's world view develops between 15 to 18 months of age and 13 years of age, so if you wanna do the single most important thing you can do in ministry, and that's to help a person develop a biblical world view. The window of time we have when we can do that and do it effectively, is relatively small, we got a decade or so during which we can do it, and we can't wait until they become teenagers, we can't wait till they're in college, can't wait till they're adults. We've got to do it when they're young, because most Americans will die with the world view that they developed prior to the age of 13, it's very unusual for an adult to substantially change anything within their world view, it happens, but usually it only happens when there's a dramatic in Canada with the Holy Spirit, and their entire life is re-arranged by God at that moment in time. And yes, that does happen, I can do it any time he wants. He doesn't need my information, but the reality is that doesn't happen very often, usually it's with children, and so it's still one of the most significant things that I get to talk about and write about. And in fact, I work at Arizona Christian University right now, and it's a world view, biblical worldview University, and one of our upcoming projects later this year is to kind of renew that research that I originally did with the transforming children into spiritual champions book. To update it and find out, Okay, what do we need to learn about today's children, the context of their households, their family, is that her schools, all of that, so that if we need to change

strategies, we need to be thinking very intentionally and clearly about what do we do going forward.

0:16:38.0 MM: We'll have that research. Well, every... Just about every thriving local faith community, local church has a children's ministry or something geared toward reaching and discipling children, having said that even though it's a priority to many churches, when you look around the church staff table and you kinda ask the question, who has the least amount of influence and leverage, it's often the person who's leading the children's ministry. So to have a resource, a data that's compelling like that and packaging the way this fact and so been a huge help to the child discipleship community.

0:18:02.5 RC: I love hearing your... I also love the fact that you yourself had a moment that I think a lot of people have when we read your research, where you go, Oh my gosh, this is so important and really convicting the fact that you experience that yourself is amusing to me, but I wanna bring this into this current moment of child decals, one of the things that we really try to focus the conversation on is about not only the importance of child discipleship, but how child discipleship works, the churches that are doing child is upset. Well, how is that shaping their community's shaping the long-term health of that church when they are doing as well compared to churches that are still having too many of those moments like those pastors had with you when you first brought up this research?

0:18:17.9 GB: Well, I'm kind of reluctant to answer that before doing our upcoming research, I don't wanna say something average based on slightly dated data, and then later this year, I have to come there and said He... I got that on, things have changed more than I thought, but I will say that I was very clear with the research we've been doing, is that with our young people with children, if we are not intentionally focused on helping them to develop a biblical world view, the world is very happy to shift their minds and hearts and lives toward other kinds of world views, and it's gonna be very hard to dislodge those. So for instance, we look at the national data among what I think a lot of people are calling Gen Z who are current middle school, high school aged people, and what we're finding is that less than 1% of that generation has a biblical world view. Basically, what that's leading us to is the extinction of biblical Christianity in America, and so if I have to say, if we were doing a trans program here and they can say, Well, what's the biggest scariest, most influential trend that you can think of? I would say it's that Christianity in America is on the edge of extinction. It's not to say that we won't have a lot of churches, Christian churches around. We won't still have Christian publishing house, will have all the institutional stuff, but in terms of people living a vibrant Christian life that's based on God's principles from the scriptures... Yeah, that's what we're gonna be lacking, and so right now in America, thanks to the older generations, we do still have enough of a remnant that remains people who are completely sold out to God, We Do whatever He calls them to do, for whatever vision he gives to them, we have enough of those left that yes, we can see this nation turn around, but we are rapidly approaching a time where... That's not gonna be the case. I know God can do anything at any time. I'm not doubting that, I'm not challenging that, but I'm just saying, when we look at what we've got to work with in terms of resources as the true church of God in America today, we're losing it, and so if we don't start building into children now in the same

way that leaders throughout history of understood... I mean, you look at Mark, you look at Atlanta, you look at Monsanto, you look at a bunch of other social and political leaders who said, You give me a child until the age of 7 And after that, they're mine, they recognize the importance of getting to children early, and sadly, the church in America has not been doing that, so whenever I speak, I try to remind, if it's a group of pastors, the single most important thing you can do is invest most of your ministry resources administering to children, don't waste it on adults, if you're gonna put something into adults, put it only into the parents or grandparents, so that they can actually minister to the children, your ministry has to be child-centric because that's where you're gonna see impact or just for our listeners, say that stat about Gen Z one more time, than less than 1% of them have a biblical world view, and when I talk about biblical world view, we're talking about both beliefs and behavior, because you do what you believe, and so we measure both. And the idea here is that a worldview is your primary decision-making tool, every decision you make flows through that mental, emotional, spiritual filter, that is your world view, and so as you're making choices... It's based on your worldview. What we know is that less than 1% of Gen Z has a world view that's based on biblical principles, most of their world view is drawn from a series of other world views, we just put out a report where we're looking at... We know only 6% of all American adults have a biblical world view. What are the other 94% half? And what we discovered is that 88% of them, their dominant world view is what we call syncretism, which means that they don't really have a not many world view, what they're doing is they're just pulling out ideas from all these other world views, Marxism, post-ladies make substantial-ism, secular humanism, Eastern messiness, whatever is out there that they like, something that they think is gonna make them feel good, something that's gonna be comfortable, something that will make things more convenient, something that seems most popular at the moment, and so they're just taking all that and throwing that together, and that becomes the core of their decision-making filtered, their world view, so with our younger generation, unless there is a dramatic move of God in the near future, we've... I hate to say it, but we lost them. Can we get them back? It's possible, yes, the Holy Spirit can do anything, but just as a sociologist, I look at the numbers, I look at the averages, and I'm saying, typically, that doesn't happen, and certainly America, it hasn't happened in a long time, so why don't we be strategic? Let's start focusing on today's children, so that, yes, we can win them to the Lord and his principles, and they in turn, will do that with their children. That's how the process should work. Where parents have the biblical responsibility to be doing that with their kids, the local church ought to be equipping and supporting parents in that process, but man, we gotta turn it around real quickly.

0:24:29.3 MM: Ross, I'm thinking, If I'm a children's ministry leader or a pastor, and I hear that right, the first thing I'm do is I'm gonna take the afternoon, I'm gonna take the after you now, and I'm gonna go... I'm gonna go sit in that and I'm gonna pray and I'm gonna think, and knowing how my minors, I'm gonna go to a white board, but as I think about where this information... Where our culture is going, where the church is going. I think we need to be asking a question if this is the case, if we're swimming in a culture of personal autonomy and Ubu and you'd be happy, and if this is what's happening in terms of the results that are yielding in terms of the core view, I'm gonna be asking questions around, well, what is it? What is it that most likely produces long-term resilient faith in the life of children, and for our

listeners who haven't heard this, Ilana is releasing in 2022 in partnership with the Barna Group, the organization and Georgia's name's sake. We're releasing an assessment for churches to measure fruitfulness and effectiveness in the area as a belonging, highly relational ministry, deeply scriptural ministry that builds a biblical Christian world view, and thirdly, becoming, that's it, that's how I experience my faith and how a loving, caring adults walk alongside of me. So if you're asking that question after hearing that from George and saying, What are we gonna do to most likely have more fruitful ministry to children, be on the look out for that assessment that's coming from the Barna Group.

0:25:48.8 GB: I wanna... Yes, for sure. I think you met, I should probably point out that I saw the barn Group about 12 years ago, so unfortunately, I'm not part of that process, but I'm glad to hear the tone.

0:26:18.8 RC: I think it's still obvious anyone who's listening to your passion and how laser-focused and urgent this message is, but my concern is, and this might just even be my own personality too, but my concern is when you see data like that... When I see data like that, I can kinda quickly take the afternoon off and then not go back to work the next day and become overwhelmed, so you as the guy who was the leader in crafting so much of this kind of structure and messaging that speaks to the urgency of this moment. What gives you hope about the future of the church, because how do you not become cynical and just decide that it's all over for us, because I think that the concerns and the way that you work through that are going to resonate with a lot of folks on the ground who are listening to this in the context of their own communities...

0:27:04.3 GB: Well, I'm a human being. So yeah, I do get discouraged. I'll see the see. No, it's got worse! How could that be? I thought we were at the low point already, so... Yeah, I go through that, but then a couple of things occurred to me, one of which is... Well, but I think I'm part of the remnant. And so I can't really give up. God put me here for such a time as this... I know what he's called me to do. It's not done yet. So yeah, I gotta keep playing the game, and the other thing that always comes back to me is that scripture that talks about... I'm gonna have to answer to God for all the things that I did in my life. So what am I gonna say? Yeah, I really believe in you. I know you're all powerful, I know you can do anything at any time, but I really didn't think you could turn this around, so I kinda gave up... That's a hard argument to make. So I'm not responsible for the results, I recognize that I'm responsible to the obedience, I'm responsible to be committed, I'm responsible to be responsible. So those are the kinds of things that I keep coming back to, and actually the joy of being able to do what God made me to do, although some of the outcomes are really distressing for me personally, the reality is... But I love doing what I get to do. He really found a niche for me, this is what he made me for, I get that, and I'm so thankful for that, so that's kind of what keeps me going, and I would hope that the people who are ministering, the kids have that same mentality of, Oh man, there's a little snotty, those brats, there's some tough to work with, and their parents are worst, you know what? Think of the impact that we can have, and God made me to do this, I can't give this up. What am I gonna do? Go sell stuff, work on commission. Now, this is where God plays you for this point in history, and what a blessing that is.

0:29:11.8 RC: You shared such a specific and beautiful story about the pastors who came up to you completely computational about how they felt like you're wasting their time. And one of the things that we've seen time and time again from this Resilient Child, a supposed messaging is pastors who are having that moment and recognizing the ways that they fall in short, and that moment might be playing out for our pastor who's listening right now. Someone who's not invested in this work with kids, how do they begin... Not only if their heart work has been stirred by this conversation, how do they begin to turn that around in the context of their communities and their priorities? Can you speak to that pivot point for folks, 'cause I would hope that some of the folks who were rude to you in 2004 have gotten the message by now...

0:29:56.8 GB: Yeah, I'm not sure, it's always a matter of, Okay, when I realize I'm wrong, I gotta rethink everything, so let me go back to square one and try to figure out what I did actually call me to do in ministry, and then try to figure out, Okay, well, if that's the calling, how can I be most strategic and intentional about fulfilling that calling, and if I'm now considering the possibility that maybe it means I need to invest a whole lot more energy and resources into children, then I've gotta start doing some homework on what does that look like, what does that mean? Who's doing what? That seems to make sense. What can I adapt into who I am and my gifts in my context so that I can be as effective as possible and that's gonna take some time, it's gonna take a lot... I think a lot of prayer and reflection, it's gonna take letting some other people in who you can trust who aren't gonna be job over it, we're gonna say, Yeah, we've been praying that you would get to that point, and here's some things for you to think about and we're totally behind you, we wanna be part of the process because this is a victory for the kingdom, and so we want to do whatever we can to support you on that growth path, and it is a growth path, but it's completely different than what they got in seminary, completely different than what they're gonna hear a pastor's conference is completely different than what their elder board is probably expecting. And by the way, that's another point is at some time, a pastor who goes through this transition of recognizing it's not about adults, it's really about children, you're probably gonna need a different board, and so to start thinking through, Yeah, how do I get people who have that perspective, have that mentality, and it may even come all the way to the point of reshaping the vision for the ministry of the church, and That's a very pivotal, very fundamental foundational thing to do, but I would encourage pastors to have the courage to do.