

Barna and the New Calvinists

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November 23, 2010



In a new [study](#) on the influence of the NeoReformed or "New Calvinist" movement on the church, the Barna Group concludes that "there is no discernable evidence from this research that there is a Reformed shift among U.S. congregation leaders over the last decade." A number of evangelical Christian leaders (such as [Skye Jethani](#) and [Ed Stetzer](#)) maintain that the study seems to contradict their on-the-ground experience. With the growing popularity of New Calvinist books and conferences, and with leaders like Mark Driscoll and John Piper becoming the secular media's go-to Christian voices, the NeoReformed movement appears to truly be the next new evangelical thing. Yet according to Barna, there are no more pastors who identify as Reformed today than there were ten years ago.

I've frequently questioned Barna's methods and conclusions. Here I wonder if the researchers are forgetting the ways in which perception is often reality. A culture or subculture's zeitgeist is not easy to measure. The influence of the NeoReformed

crowd--often evidenced through hyper-Calvinist theology, strict gender roles and belief in penal substitutionary atonement as the litmus test for one's faith--goes beyond pastors or even church members self-identifying as Reformed.

I've been shocked recently to discover the stealth influence the movement has had on evangelical friends and family. When I was attending a conservative evangelical Bible church some 12-15 years ago, the church believed in a free-will theology and mocked people who followed a human like Calvin instead of following only the Bible. These days, the same friends still think following Calvin is wrong, yet their theology is pure Calvinism. They truly believe that their theology comes from a plain reading of scripture, and they become really confused when I point out how their "biblical" theology has shifted. They never call themselves Reformed, but for all practical purposes, that is what they are.

I see a comparable influence at work in the church I currently attend. The church is very much an emerging church--we are postmodern, the leaders read all the emerging authors--yet we do not call ourselves emerging. In fact, most of the people at the church have no idea what the emerging church is. But we are influenced by the movement.

So I would not dismiss the influence of the NeoReformed crowd simply because it cannot be easily measured. Minds are being changed (whether they realize it or not) through books, radio shows, magazines and conferences. Ideas have power. And for those of us who worry about what the influence of the NeoReformed message means for the church--especially for women in the church--I don't think we should let this study convince us to stop being watchful.