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Book Review: Church Planting in the Secular West: Learning from the European Experience by Stefan Paas

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BOOK REVIEW

Church Planting in the Secular West: Learning from the European Experience.

By Paas, Stefan.

Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016.

304pp.

US\$34.00.

Reviewed by Keith R. Sellers, D. Min. candidate in Church Growth and Multiplication, Talbot School of Theology, missionary in Europe with WorldVenture Mission.

Labeling himself a “skeptical advocate” of church planting (3), Stefan Paas presents a missional theology on church planting in the secular West. The text is born out of his theological reflection and direct missional experience in a post-Christian European culture. His ministry expertise is evidenced by two church plants in the Netherlands. Currently he serves as a missiology professor at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and the Theological University of Kampen, Netherlands.

In chapter one, Paas describes the classic paradigm of church planting in the Middle Ages, *plantatio ecclesiae*, as planting churches in areas where there was no Christian presence with the proper sequence as evangelism, gathering, and planting (16). He then presents the modern and late-modern evangelical paradigms as rooted in the

Enlightenment, the Reformation, organic church thinking, and church growth theory.

Paas traces a valuable survey of the Christianization of Europe as it relates to church planting (Chapter 1). Paas shows how the Reformation's individualism affected the Pietist movements and eventually evolved to the individual rejection of faith altogether, hence secular Europe. Such a pattern of gradual secularization may repeat itself in American and Asian democracies. The book should have at least mentioned the secularizing effects of Europe's socialist philosophical movements, two tragic world wars, the rise of French postmodern writers, and western materialism. Individualism alone is not responsible for contemporary European secularism.

In the second chapter, *Planting Better Churches*, Paas addresses two popular reasons for church planting in Europe, the failure of traditional churches in evangelizing their country and the need to enrich the overall Christian expression of the nation. Analyzing the ties that the Reformation, Anabaptists, and Pietism had on church planting in Europe from the 16th to the 19th century, Paas again shows how individualist approaches to persuading inquirers to make faith-based decisions evolved to a pervasive, individualized rejection of faith in Europe.

The third chapter, *Planting More Churches*, is perhaps the most controversial chapter. Paas lays out a detailed critique against church growth theory (CGT). Paas unleashes much criticism of the inherent pragmatism of church growth theory (CGT), and accuses its proponents of unknowingly implementing religious market theory (RMT), which he believes will not work in the European setting (129-131). CGT adherents will quickly object, noting that McGavran's thinking is rooted in communication theory, cultural anthropology, and biblical precedents. Paas finds fault with McGavran's view that we need to plant many new churches in order to reach modern Europe (113-114). He accuses proponents of CGT of making church planting equivalent to the gospel. In a slow-to-respond Europe, a church's faithfulness may be defined much differently than in areas where people are quicker to make conversations with new people and convert to new concepts.

Chapter four explores the right conditions and motives for innovative church planting in Europe. The final chapter, *In Defense of Church Planting in Europe*, lists four important reflections on the relationship of church and mission. The author promotes the “communal character of evangelism” which in his mind is most vividly seen in the life of small churches (261-63).

Those seeking field ready methods for church planting among secular people might be disappointed because Paas intends to analyze “reasons and motives for church planting in Europe” (2). John R. Franke commends the work as “providing a missional theology of church planting in the aftermath of Christendom” (xii). While American readers may question the relevance of this work for their continent, Franke warns, “we are surely headed in that direction” (x).

Like other critics of CGT Paas misunderstands the intentions and effects of the homogenous unit principle (HUP). He condemns the HUP in chapter three, but later he states that the reason immigrant churches fail to effectively reach native Europeans is due to the “gap of race and culture” (177). Reducing cultural gaps is precisely what McGavran’s HUP is all about. In the last chapter Paas wisely advocates a “greater diversity of churches” in light of recent globalizing trends (252). Strangely, he advises implementing ideas, which are rooted in the homogenous unit concept, and then a few lines later he condemns HUP as “theologically suspect” (252-253). Using Paul’s practice of being “all things to all men” as a theological basis, he supports the use of the multi-congregational model to reach different kinds of people within the same parish church (252). Such a model is rooted in the homogenous unit principle. Another helpful strategy, which Paas mentions includes making church planting adjustments to areas with too many of the same kind of churches or with an uneven distribution. He admits that “young congregations are almost always quite homogenous,” but he believes that the church must reach out to a wider constituency to avoid the sin of exclusivity (254-255). One new trend unfortunately left out of the last chapter includes the planting of multi-ethnic churches wherein ethnically diverse leaders start with the homogenous goal of being a heterogeneous fellowship.

European churchmen are rightfully offended by the American penchant for grand goal setting, proud self-promotion, and unmitigated

pragmatism. Paas believes that some places have “enough churches,” but he fails to define exactly what that means in demographics (31). Because North American culture sometimes tends to follow European trends the book serves as a profound warning concerning what difficulties may await the American religious scene.