

A Review of Stefan Paas' *Church Planting in the Secular West: Learning from the European Experience*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2016, 316 pages.

Stefan Paas has produced a work of exceptional academic rigor and relevance not only for those interested or involved in church planting in Europe, but in any other context characterized by increasing secularization, anti-religious attitudes and importantly, where there is already a presence of other Christian churches. Paas is currently the J.H. Bavinck Professor of Missiology and Intercultural Theology at Vrije Universiteit (VU) Amsterdam, and Professor of Missiology at Theologische Universiteit Kampen (TUK).

The main thesis of the book is that we should hold affirming, yet critical views of why we engage in church planting in Europe and, by extension, any other post-Christendom milieu characterized by the presence of multiple pre-existing churches. Paas repeatedly challenges his readers to assess the motivations they have for church planting in contexts where other churches already exist, especially in terms of what he refers to as confessional/denominational church planting that is often more sectarian than missional, as it tends to stem from a critique of existing churches in the area. Planters can be tempted to say: "There *are* other churches in this locale, but they are heretical and/or beyond renewal," or simply, "Yes, there are other churches in this locale, but not of my denomination." He summarizes his own position by saying, "the door to the future can only be found through cooperation and the combined wisdom of many Christians from different traditions" (184).

Paas begins his book by exploring these categories of motivation for church planting in today's secular Europe: confessional, growth and innovation, and explores their historical roots. He cautions that the biblical warrant for some modern practices of church planting such as those just detailed are questionable at best. He is critical of church growth theories for promoting numerical growth for growth's sake. He is likewise unconvinced that a Keller-like model of gospel transformation of culture should be the overarching *telos* of church planting. In contrast he states, "the strategy for the future must be the creation of countercultural communities, living out an alternative lifestyle based on gospel values amidst an essentially pagan culture" (187).

Paas' discussion of church planting as *response* to growing religious demand rather than an end in itself is particularly enlightening. He gives reasoned arguments to refute the claim that church planting is in itself the evangelistic methodology par excellence. He states, "'church' is what emerges when Christians commit themselves to the double task of witnessing and making disciples in a new context." As Christians engage in "simple communal practices like praying, Bible study, eating together, daily rhythms of spirituality, sharing time and possessions, and intimate involvement in the lives of the poor and marginalized" (222) a new church *may* emerge from these activities, but these are the activities that we should be about rather than planting churches simply for the sake of planting more churches and "concentrating on the formation of a church too soon." He states that "what 'church' is in this particular context may become a journey of discovery rather than an imposed outcome" (223). Of the three motivations for church planting presented, Paas most supports those characterized by

innovation. He notes that these tend to take the form of low-stakes experiments, or “free havens,” which are nonetheless characterized by sacrifice, and tend to emerge at the margins of the established order.

Who should read this book? First of all, anyone involved in or considering involvement in church planting in Europe. Paas notes that planting additional churches where other churches already exist can be divisive. We need to discern if a new church is really what is called for or if we might better partner with, and offer our gifts in partnership with existing churches. At the same time, anyone interested in church planting will benefit from this book as Paas makes a convincing call to focus on *process* rather than *product*. He states, “radical renewal will only take place when we do not concentrate on results but on the facilitation of stimulating processes” (225).