

*Church Planting in Post-Christian Soil: Theology and Practice*

by Christopher B. James

Review by Jack Jackson

Church planting has been on the forefront of conversations on evangelism and mission in the post-Christian West for many decades. For much of that time, conversations have often centered on “effective” models of starting churches that demonstrate significant numerical growth in areas that already have a high percentage of self-professed Christians. Churches have been started in areas that aren’t known as highly Christian, but the systematic study of churches in these largely unchristian areas has been few and far between.

Christopher B. James seeks to right this imbalance. James proposes that understanding how Christian congregations are formed, and then nurtured, in areas that are increasingly secular or post-Christian will be the central task of ecclesial communities over the decades to come. Therefore, James sets about to discover key elements, both theological and practical, of churches in such areas.

In Chapter 1 James lays the foundation for Seattle as perhaps the best “proxy” for church planting in the urban U.S. for years to come. (13) The choice of Seattle will come as no surprise to any contemporary church planter in the U.S. today. Nevertheless, James’ description of Seattle’s secular nature is both compelling and illustrative of the changes coming to many urban centers around the country.

In Chapters 2-4 James identifies four primary models of new churches in Seattle, as reflected in the contemporary literature on practical ecclesiology, and as evident in his research. The four models center on an understanding of the church as Great Commission Team, Household of the Spirit, New Community, or Neighborhood incarnation. Each of the four models differ in their

understanding of spirituality, the key components of their identity, and their understanding of their Christian mission in the world. While churches do not often fall into only one distinct category, sometimes exhibiting trends and characteristics from multiple models, typically one model, James finds, is dominant.

Missiologists well as church planters who are interested in launching faithful churches, and not just numerically large churches, will appreciate James' focus on both practice and theology. The template he uses is the contemporary conversation of missional theology. His conclusion is that, of the four models he discovers, the church as Neighborhood Incarnational model "most thoroughly embodies missional theology" (182). In turn, this model will be the most important one for church planters in areas of the U.S. that become more like the "urban, technological, progressive, and post-Christian context like Seattle." (182) Importantly, since many church planters will sense that one of the other models is most relevant to their context, James offers helpful guidance for leaders in each of the four models in chapter 6. James concludes his book by identifying helpful practical streams from his theological and practical research that both new church planters and ecclesial leaders will find helpful.

Church planters, as well as ecclesial leaders responsible for nurturing church planting movements, who believe that engaging an increasingly post-Christian U.S. is vital to missional faithfulness will find this book incredibly insightful and informative. Those not persuaded, despite James' helpful and I believe well-argued thesis, that a missional theology is the most helpful one for this age, may be unpersuaded by his basic argument. Then again, those in the latter camp may never pick up the book or read this review. Those of us who are persuaded, and who believe that faithfulness to the Gospel today necessitates a profound following of the Spirit into post-Christian realms, will be challenged and encouraged by James' timely work.