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BOOK REVIEW

James R. Payton. *Getting the Reformation Wrong: Correcting Some Misunderstandings*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2010. 272 pp. ISBN 978-0-8308-3880-6.

This volume is a helpful and intriguing look at common mistakes made when thinking about the Reformation. Payton's stated audience is primarily Christian university or college upper-level students, as well as pastors and teachers in Protestant church settings; consequently, it assumes and addresses an audience sympathetic to the Protestant cause (although he hopes interested Roman Catholics will find his conclusions helpful). The contents of the book will come as no surprise to those well-versed in Reformation history, for they are already scandalized by the way in which people "get the Reformation wrong." However, what makes this book so helpful is its thoughtful engagement with a confessional community by a professing Christian author, but an engagement that is nonetheless intellectually satisfying to those who want a more objective historical analysis of Christian history.

Like any good historian, Payton wants the past to be understood on its own terms and in context. Consequently he is disturbed—and rightly so—by the misappropriation of the Reformation in the everyday life of the church. Increasingly historians speak of "usable pasts"—referring to how history is often shaped by present-day needs—and this book reveals the ways in which contemporary Protestants (especially evangelical Protestants) have constructed a past that quite often is divorced from the actual events and theology of the reformers. This book has twelve chapters, and each chapter deals with one such issue that vexes Payton.

The first chapter identifies how some people "get the Reformation wrong" by "overlooking or neglecting its historical rootedness." Payton details two centuries of the need for—and calls for—reform that pre-dated the Reformation. And he argues that when the Reformation finally came, it was a response to a

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“deep yearning” and need for relevancy, not something that simply dropped out of the sky, so to speak, without any context.

The Renaissance was not simply a human-centered movement and the Reformation a God-centered movement—two polar opposites as some claim. Their relationship was far more complex than that, and in chapter 2 Payton shows how numerous Reformers were positively influenced by the Renaissance (especially Lutherans influenced by Northern humanism), and numerous Renaissance writers were not as godless as has often been assumed. He concludes by arguing that the Renaissance was actually a friend, not a foe, of the Reformation.

The third chapter debunks claims that portray the Reformation as a clarion call for truth from the moment of Luther’s first challenge to the church. Rather, Payton argues, Luther’s teaching evolved over the years (especially the early years), and the reforms were “actually quite messy.” Here Payton’s description is especially helpful, for he demonstrates well his claim that the early Reformation was “chaotic” as “German society jumped on the reforming horse and galloped off in all directions at once.” A part of the chaotic nature of the Reformation was the reality that the reformers did not all agree with one another, and this is the focus of Payton’s fourth chapter.

The fifth and six chapters seek to clarify misuses of the iconic doctrines *sola fide* and *sola scriptura*. Payton is convinced that the misuse of *sola fide* is the “most glaring” way of getting the Reformation wrong. His issue seems to be mainly with the worst excesses of evangelical Protestants who in their zeal to make converts (e.g., revivalists who get people to simply say a prayer and be saved) have downplayed the necessity of good works. His equating of the trivializing of grace and the business of faith of contemporary evangelists with the “doggerel Tetzels” is one of the most provocative parts of the book. Payton makes it clear that for numerous Reformers, *sola fide* did not preclude the necessity of good works. As for *sola scriptura*, Protestants need to remember that the Reformers did not reject all authority but Scripture. While Scripture was the only unquestioned authority, they understood the Church Fathers, creeds, and councils to be important subordinate authorities. Payton challenges Protestants

to move away from a just-me-and-my-Bible approach to a position more faithful to the reformers, one that studies and respects the ancient traditions of the church.

Chapter 7 deals with how contemporary movements have uncritically embraced the Anabaptist movement. This is just one example of where Payton's concern is more with popular attitudes in the pews than what the academy is saying. He argues that Baptists did not have their origins in Anabaptism, but in seventeenth-century separatism in the Church of England. Scholars of Baptist history have argued this for decades, although regarding popular attitudes in Baptist churches Payton may be right. Payton also rightly notes that modern-day Mennonites, and other groups that trace their origins to sixteenth-century Anabaptists, often do not realize the remarkable diversity among early radical reformers often lumped together under the term "Anabaptists."

The eighth chapter details how reforms were taking place in the Roman Catholic Church, before, during, and after the Reformation, not just due to the need to respond to the crisis of Luther, et al.

Chapter 9 takes a unique turn, for it deals not with how contemporary Christians get the Reformation wrong, but rather, with how Protestant scholasticism got it wrong. Payton is not convinced by scholars who are sympathetic with post-Reformation developments, and argues that the fixation on logic and objectification of doctrine that characterized seventeenth-century Protestant scholasticism was a departure from Luther and other reformers.

As the book nears its conclusion Payton begins to ask probing questions of the legacy of the Reformation. His answer to the question "is the Reformation a success?" in chapter 10 may surprise many readers who assume that it was an unqualified success. The particular failures, disappointments, and divisions of Protestant leaders and movements, and the loss of vast swaths of land to the Jesuits and a spiritually invigorated Post-Tridentine Catholic Church, leads him to conclude that the "Jesuits have the best claim to being successful." This statement, no doubt, will challenge the triumphalism and hagiography of many Protestants.

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Should the contemporary church seek to emulate the Reformation? Is it a norm or pattern for contemporary churches? In chapter 11 Payton states that the reformers would have argued against their period being a “Golden Age,” and that instead they would have pointed back to the early church as a Golden Age that was worthy of emulation. Here Payton’s passion for the Church Fathers is evident, for he quickly becomes an advocate of looking past the reformers back to antiquity for the norm. However, one is left wondering if the early Christians would have agreed with Payton that their age was a Golden Age, for it too was marked by disappointments and divisions, not to mention heresy.

Payton’s portrayal of the Reformation as both “Triumph and Tragedy” in the final chapter is shaped by his Protestant confession, but also his understanding of the complexity of the sixteenth century. His personal confession leads to his conclusion that the Reformation was a success because it woke the church out of its medieval “spiritual torpor” and made the gospel clear once again. Of course, his Catholic readers would not be so quick to call the doctrinal reforms a triumph. However, he notes that it was also a tragedy. The often violent division of the church and the subsequent splintering of Protestantism into a scandalous number of denominations have tarnished the legacy of the Reformation.

This book provides a much-needed correction for those less versed in the history of the Reformation, especially those whose history is based on popular perceptions of the seemingly romantic past. It could have included a bibliography for further reading, since one implication of Payton’s argument is that people need to read more Reformation history to get their history right. Nevertheless, I recommend this informative, sometimes provocative, rethinking of popular notions regarding Protestantism’s origins and identity.

Gordon L. Heath
McMaster University Divinity College, Hamilton