GETTING THE REFORMATION WRONG

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Category: Reviews

Disclaimer: The nice people at IVP Academic provided me with a review copy of this book.

Continuing the trawl through my holiday reading we come to Getting the Reformation Wrong: Correcting Some Misunderstandings by James R. Payton Jr. The highlights are that I thoroughly enjoyed this book and would recommend it to anyone with an interest in Church history or to anyone who claims a Reformed heritage. Though the book is in the IVP Academic imprint, it isn't particularly heavy, nor is it so detailed that the non-specialist gets lost.

It is a slightly large format paperback and weighs in at a little over 250 pages with a good name index and subject index at the back. If you want to look up all of the mentions of Calvin, you can do so quite easily. There is a liberal (and helpful) dose of footnotes, but these don't overwhelm the main text.

I have a couple of slight gripes with the book. Firstly, the term Reformation is used in a fairly restricted sense. The book does not deal with the early reform movements such as the Lollards and Hussites, nor does it give more than a passing mention to the English Reformation. I would also argue that that the author has missed one of the central issues in the Reformation, which is the growth of indigenous language Christian movements in northern Europe. (I'm afraid you'll have to wait for my book to read about that.)

So, overall, this is a good book about the Reformation, which doesn't include a couple of issues which are particular favourites of mine. The problem is, that it claims to be so much more - and it is here that I'm a little confused by the book. Let me quote from the blurb on the back of the book:

> *Using the most up-to-date, Reformation scholarship, the author exposes, challenges and corrects some common misrepresentations of the Reformation, including:*
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> - *The medieval Catholic Church was monolithic and moribund.*
> - *The Renaissance was strictly a human-centred movement.*
> - *The Reformation progressed rapidly and smoothly.*
> - *The reformers were in agreement about most theological issues.*
> - *Sola scriptura means Scripture is our only religious authority.*
> - *Protestant scholasticism was a return to doctrinal faithfulness.*
> - *The Reformation was a uniform success.*

My problem is that I don't know of many people who hold to any, much less all, of these ideas. To take the example of *sola Scriptura.* Payton goes into some detail to demonstrate that while the Reformers believed that Scripture is the ultimate religious authority, they still had a lot of respect for patristic literature. The point is usefully demonstrated, but it is hardly news. Anyone who doesn't recognise that Calvin owed a debt to Augustine hasn't read either of them! Likewise, Payton demonstrates that Luther's believe in justification by faith alone, did not mean that Luther rejected

the need for Christians to do good works.

> *For the reformers, justification is by faith alone, but faith is never alone.*

The point is well made, but again, I don't see this as being particularly earth shattering.

Strangely, for a book on the reformation, I found the chapters on the Catholic church to be theÂ most instructive and interesting. The opening chapter on the state of the late mediaeval church was fascinating and included a number of things I'd not come across before and the later chapter on the Catholic (or counter) reformation was also very good.

Perhaps the two most controversial chapters - certainly the ones that will cause protestants to squirm - are the ones that review the impact of the Reformation: Was the Reformation a Success? and The Reformation: Triumph and Tragedy.

In the first of these chapters, Payton states:

> *Indeed, as the sixteenth century came to an end, the Jesuits were unquestionably the most successful of all the Reformers in achieving their objectives.*

As I say, this might cause a few protestants to feel uncomfortable, but a dispassionate review of the history of the next 200 years of church life, especially of missionary history make it very difficult to disagree with this conclusion. (However much one would like to!).

I believe that the last chapter on triumph or tragedy give an excellent summing up of the complex issue that is the Reformation. This summary quote from p. 256 captures this well.

> *Our examination leads to the conclusion that the Reformation was, on the one hand, a triumph: it rediscovered and boldly proclaimed the apostolic message, the Christian gospel. Our considerations also lead, on the other hand, to the conclusion that the Reformation was a tragedy for the Christian gospel: divisions began among the Protestant Reformers and have mushroomed among their descendants in contravention of the explicit words of Jesus Christ himself. It is at least a horrendous anomaly that the sixteenth-century Reformation got rid of the clutter that obscured the foundation of the Christian faith, only to have Protestants cover that foundation again with the clutter of our manifold divisions.*

This is a good, thought provoking book and well worth reading, but it isn't quite as revolutionary or earth shattering as it presents itself to be.