



Getting the Reformation Wrong: Correcting Some Misunderstandings

240 pages, paperback, 978-0-8308-3880-6, \$23

Available August 2010

<http://redeemer.ca/faculty/jim-payton.aspx>

An Interview with James R. Payton, Author of *Getting the Reformation Wrong*

Most North American Protestants consider themselves heirs of the Reformation tradition, with Luther's *Ninety-Five Theses*, Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, and cherished doctrines like *sola fide* and *sola scriptura*. Pastors preach and teach about how Reformation events affect their congregations today and what Reformation principles mean for the twentieth-century church.

James R. Payton, Reformation historian and Christian scholar, has encountered enough misinformation and half-truth regarding the Reformation to suggest that the Reformers themselves would be surprised and disappointed to hear their life's work misapplied to the situation of the twenty-first-century church. He offers students, pastors and layleaders a resource for apprehending the Reformation for themselves, and for rightly applying to today's church lessons learned in the sixteenth century.

Why did you write *Getting the Reformation Wrong*?

James: As a Reformation specialist, I became aware over the last few years that many people in Christian colleges, seminaries and churches hold some mistaken ideas about the Reformation, how it transpired and even what it emphasized. I recognized that a volume which dealt with and corrected some of these misunderstandings would be helpful.

Does the Reformation really matter for ordinary Christians today?

James: If we can get a better sense of how the Reformation unfolded in its day, that should help us assess and respond to the situations Christians confront in ours. Since the Reformation succeeded in rescuing the gospel message from the clutter which had piled up to obscure it, we have readily idealized the Reformation—and, unaware of its history, treated it almost mythically. Idealizing the development of the Reformation and how the Reformers related to each other ends up distancing them from what goes on among us in the hurly-burly of life in the twenty-first century.

What are the most common misperceptions about the Reformation that you have encountered in your teaching and church life?

James: We often do not know the setting into which the Reformation burst, so we end up misunderstanding how it developed, why it found support, the way it addressed the questions of its day and how it was challenged. Unaware of that historical context, we have

AUTHOR Q & A



James R. Payton Jr. (Ph.D., University of Waterloo, Canada) is a professor of history at Redeemer University College, Ancaster, Ontario, Canada. He has written many articles on the Reformation, including subjects such as John Calvin, Martin Bucer and the influence of the Reformation in Ukraine. He is very involved in ministry to Eastern Europe, serving from 1998 to 2006 as executive secretary of Christians Associated for Relationships with Eastern Europe, and since 2006 as president. Payton is also the author of *Light from the Christian East* (InterVarsity Press).

ended up mistaken in several ways about what transpired in the Reformation and what the Reformers actually taught.

You address the doctrines of *sola scriptura* and *sola fide* in your book and suggest that many of us with roots in the Reformation do not fully grasp the meaning and significance of these key terms. Can you summarize the problem?

James: Too often we have seized on these principles of the Reformation and isolated them from the questions the Reformers were dealing with, complicated questions about religious authority and about the basis for our justification which had been wrestled with in medieval Christianity for more than two centuries. The Reformers' answers were *sola scriptura* and *sola fide*. But many of us have transformed "sola" into "solitary" in these regards. When we do that, we end up setting forth viewpoints that the Reformers actually repudiated.

You conclude your book by labeling the Reformation as both a triumph and a tragedy. What is the "tragedy" of the Reformation, and how does it affect the church today?

James: On the night before he was betrayed, Christ prayed that those who would believe in him through the word of the apostles might be one "so that the world may believe" (John 17:20-21). In reclaiming the apostolic message and proclaiming it anew, the Reformation sought to purify the church but ended up splitting it. The Reformation set the pattern: Protestants split not only from Rome but also from each other—Lutherans versus Reformed—with each segment going on to split into further rival bodies, which then split again and again. By our day, this has resulted in multiplied thousands of Protestant denominations. This is a tragic legacy of the Reformation, since—according to Christ's prayer—it undermines the credibility of the apostolic message.