

## Book Review

By Wes Bredenhof

*Getting the Reformation Wrong: Correcting Some Misunderstandings*, James R. Payton Jr., Downers Grove: IVP, 2010. Paperback, 240 pages, \$23.00 USD.

The Reformation is dear to Reformed people – after all, it contains our historical and theological heritage. However, it is possible to hold misguided notions about this significant sixteenth-century event. The purpose of this book is to address some of those misguided notions.

The author, James R. Payton, is a professor of history at Redeemer University College in Hamilton, Ontario. He writes out of many years of teaching and research, so I came to this volume with high expectations. In the introduction, the author promises to present his corrections on the basis of “bedrock” Reformation scholarship. The results are mixed.

### Positive Contributions

Let’s begin with the book’s positive contributions. The chapter dealing with *sola Scriptura* (by Scripture alone) is excellent. Payton argues that the Reformers never intended to disengage the interpretation of Scripture from tradition, especially from the ancient church. He points out, for instance, how Martin Bucer emphasized the necessity for ministerial candidates to be familiar with the authorities of the early church (153). Yes, the Reformers placed Scripture above all, but that did not mean throwing out the early church fathers and Christian tradition. Where it was in agreement with Scripture and built on Scripture, the early church was to be respected highly.

I can also commend the chapter regarding *sola fide* (by faith alone). The Reformers unanimously taught that we are justified by faith alone. However, as Payton points out, that does not mean that works are unimportant. All the Reformers taught that justifying faith produces the fruit of good deeds. Of course, the chapter is predicated on the assumption that there are those who argue that *sola fide* means that Christians need not be concerned about good works. Unfortunately, Payton does not present any solid evidence that those who argue in this manner actually appeal to the Reformation. In this case, as in several others in the book, I would argue that it’s not so much about getting the Reformation wrong as not even knowing that the Reformation **exists** or especially not caring about what the Reformation taught.

There is also a fine chapter on the Renaissance and its relation to the Reformation. Here Payton does give some concrete evidence of someone who gets this relationship wrong. He mentions Francis Schaeffer in his film series and book, *How Should We Then Live?* (53). Schaeffer had argued that the Reformation and Renaissance were fundamentally opposed to one another. Payton makes the case that Renaissance humanism was largely a friend to the Reformation. While one might wish for more nuance, this conclusion seems to be on the right track.

I appreciated many things about this book, but unfortunately, there are also some key points at which Payton himself has gotten the Reformation wrong. I'll mention four of them.

### **Still Getting the Reformation Wrong**

In chapter 4, Payton addresses the matter of "Conflict Among the Reformers." Here he's addressing the misunderstanding that all the Reformers agreed with one another on every point. As an aside, as before it would be helpful to have an example or two of this misunderstanding. As one of the key points of difference among the Reformers, Payton mentions Luther's view of the law. He says that Luther agreed with the first two uses of the law, the so-called pedagogical use (the law is meant to expose sin and guide us to Christ) and the civil use (the law is meant to structure civil society). However, he argues that Luther repudiated the third use of the law, the law as a guide for thankful, loving Christian living (96). Unfortunately, Payton provides no evidence that this was Luther's position. Furthermore, Luther does adopt the third use of the law in his Large and Small Catechisms. In these catechisms, Luther clearly presents the law as a guideline for the Christian life. It would appear that Payton has gotten Luther wrong.

Chapter 7 finds the author arguing against contemporary misportrayals of the Anabaptists. He gives an appropriate warning that there was diversity among the Anabaptists and they shouldn't all be tarred with the same brush. He rightly corrects attempts to draw a straight line between modern day Baptists and Reformation-era Anabaptists. However, one thing that was missing in this chapter is another substantial way in which many people today get the Reformation wrong: portraying the main issue with the Anabaptists as being baptism. When Guido de Brès wrote his magnum opus refuting the errors of the Anabaptists of his time (*La racine et fondement des Anabaptistes*), the lengthiest chapter was not about baptism, but about erroneous Anabaptist formulations of the doctrine of Christ. The Reformers were concerned about the Anabaptist **error** regarding baptism, but they were far more concerned about Anabaptist **heresies** regarding Christology. I use the word "heresy" advisedly here to refer to errors which conflict with the ecumenical creeds. Among those heresies was the heavenly-flesh Christology of Menno Simons and Melchior Hoffmann. They believed that Christ received his human flesh from heaven, and not from Mary. This was recognized by the Reformers and the Roman Catholics alike as being a heresy, a position which contradicted the Athanasian Creed. But we hear nothing about this from Payton and that's regrettable. For us to avoid getting the Reformation wrong, we need to understand the full picture of why there was such strong opposition to the Anabaptists in the sixteenth century.

However, the most significant problem in this book is found in chapter 9. Here Payton argues that post-Reformation Protestant scholasticism represented "a significant shift" from the Reformation, not only in terms of method, but also in content. As mentioned earlier, he wrote that he was going to proceed on the "bedrock" of the latest Reformation scholarship. Yet the growing consensus in Reformation studies does not support his case in this chapter at all. In

fact, Payton here reverts to a sort of “Calvin versus the Calvinists” way of approaching history that was far more common fifty years ago. In that way of writing history (or historiography), Calvin was the pristine Reformation theologian. The next generation lapsed into (or as Payton puts it, “rushed to”) Aristotelian reason and scholastic methodology. In this historiography, Calvin would not approve of these later developments. Of course, the implicit argument is that we must look to Calvin. With this kind of historiography, the word “scholastic” is almost always used in a negative and pejorative sense. In the last few decades, Reformation historians have largely abandoned the “Calvin vs. the Calvinists” approach. Through the work of influential scholars such as Heiko Oberman, David Steinmetz, and Richard Muller, many historians have come to see that there are both discontinuities and continuities between the Reformation and medieval scholasticism, and between the Reformation and post-Reformation scholasticism. In his chapter on the Renaissance, Payton argued for a more nuanced view of its relationship to the Reformation. However, he fails to apply that same method and approach to Protestant scholasticism.

Let me give just two examples of how his approach is problematic and “gets the Reformation wrong.” When arguing that the post-Reformation changed the content of Reformed theology, he presents two instances that supposedly prove his case. The first is a Lutheran, Johann Gerhard, and his development of the doctrine of the incarnation. Gerhard uses the language of Aristotle in speaking about material, efficient, final, and instrumental causes (204). The second instance is that of Johannes Wollebius, a Reformed theologian. Wollebius uses Aristotle’s categories to explain the doctrine of justification (204-205). Payton claims that this is different than the Reformers, particularly John Calvin. However, it does not take much digging to find Calvin using Aristotle’s causal categories in his *Institutes* (e.g. 2.17.2, 3.14.17). Payton therefore overstates his case. He ought to explain how Calvin made use of Aristotle, while yet still failing to be impressed with much of the scholastic methodology employed by his contemporaries, particularly at the Sorbonne. Oddly, Payton has a footnote to an essay by David Steinmetz which he calls “an excellent, nuanced summation of Calvin’s attitude towards scholastic theological methodology” (197). But then why didn’t he make use of Steinmetz’ insights? To imply that Calvin had no meaningful positive relationship to scholasticism is surely to “get the Reformation wrong.”

The second example is that Payton argues that the Protestant scholastics depersonalized the Christian faith (208). He asserts that Scripture, sin and faith were all depersonalized. So, with regards to sin, he says that the Protestant scholastics argued that “sin is a violation of divine law, which renders the offending sinner guilty.” The emphasis was not on unfaithfulness to God and estrangement from him, as it had been in the Reformation. This sounds persuasive, but the reader should note that Payton gives **no** evidence from primary sources. When he defines sin in his influential *Loci Communes Theologici*, the Reformer Philip Melancthon writes, “Sin is a depraved affection, a depraved activity of the heart against the law of God.” That sounds a lot like the post-Reformation doesn’t it? But it comes from Melancthon in 1555. Further, Payton alleges that Protestant scholasticism depersonalized faith “to the acceptance of right doctrine” (208). But all the Protestant scholastics that I have read define

faith as not only accepting right doctrine, but also personally embracing Christ with confidence. Read what William Ames said about faith:

As for “faith” we do not understand it properly as assent or some act of the intellect, nor as confidence in the sense of the expectation of the will, which our hope and confidence are designated, but as the act of the will or heart that is properly called “choice” (*electio*), by which we lean back, settle into, or repose on Christ, clinging to Him as to a suitable and sufficient mediator, so that through Him we may be saved. (*A Sketch of the Christian’s Catechism*, 40).

Ames was a Reformed scholastic theologian. Does that sound like someone who has depersonalized the faith? I have to conclude that here Payton gets both the Reformation and the post-Reformation wrong.

Finally, I need to comment on the last chapter. Payton rightly insists that the Reformation was a success in that it involved a recovery of the biblical gospel. But at the same time, he wants to argue that the existence of numerous denominations also points to a tragedy engendered by the Reformation. Regrettably his analysis of this situation reflects a doctrine of the church foreign to the Reformation. He alleges that “we heirs of the Protestant Reformation have dropped layer of denominational clutter over layer of doctrinal distinctiveness in so many strata on the apostolic foundation that the gospel itself has been cluttered over” (255). But what if some of these divisions are necessary to preserve the gospel? What if the Reformation taught us from Scripture that there are true churches who hold to pure preaching of the gospel, pure administration of the sacraments and the faithful exercise of discipline? What if the Reformation taught us from Scripture that there are also false churches, as well as sects? Would it be a triumph or a tragedy for God’s people to be faithful to his Word?

There are many more things in this volume on which I could comment, both good and bad. I wish that I could recommend it; after all, we need more solid and accessible Reformation literature. As noted above, there are some good chapters and some excellent insights scattered throughout. On the whole, however, the book is evidence that old ways of writing Reformation and post-Reformation history die hard. Using this volume as a guide, many will continue to get the Reformation wrong on some key points.