

Pastor Stef's Book Review – February 2017

With 2017 being the 500th year anniversary of the Protestant Reformation I made a New Year's resolution to read ten pages a day either about the Reformation or something by one of the Reformers. One of the books I finished in January is James R. Payton Jr. ***Getting the Reformation Wrong: Correcting Some Misunderstandings (2010)***.

Payton dispels many of the common myths that have developed about the Reformation. Myths like: The Reformation was a united movement against the unified corrupt Catholic Church. Reality: The Reformers were quite divided among themselves and caused their churches to divide into several splinters. And the Catholic Church had a variety of positions within it, including her own reform movements. Myth: The Reformation was a God-centered movement and the Renaissance was a human-centered movement. Truth: Both movements had spiritual and human components to them and often overlapped. Myth: By *Sola Scriptura* the Reformers meant that the Bible is the only authority. Truth: The Reformers saw the early church fathers, creeds and councils as highly authoritative and meant by *sola Scriptura* that the Bible was the *final/ultimate* authority. These and many other wrong ideas about the Reformation are both addressed and corrected in Payton's book.

Getting the facts of history right is important for getting at the truth and learning from the past. When history gets rewritten, like the "America/Canada was once a *Christian* country" rhetoric, to support people's causes and political movements, this fudging of the facts blinds us to what we can learn from the past and what our current situation in history is like. The Old Testament never presents history idealistically. Even in Israel's *best of times* it shows us the good, the bad and the ugly. The Bible teaches us a much more responsible way to read (and write) history than a lot of modern propaganda.

So how do we read the Reformation? Payton concludes by saying that it is to be read as both a triumph and a tragedy. It was a triumph for the recovery of the gospel - that salvation is found in Christ alone, by grace alone, through faith alone. And it was a triumph in the moral cleanup it produced in the Catholic Church's Counter-Reformation (i.e. Council of Trent). Never again would the Catholic Church sink to the depths that it did prior to the Reformation. (And since Vatican II - 1960s - the Protestant/Catholic divide has significantly lessened.

But the Reformation was also a tragedy because of its denominational splintering into (today) around 40,000 denominations. Plus the name calling, politicking, argumentativeness and continual fighting for "the truth" modeled by the Reformers and their scholastic followers (and reaching its zenith in American fundamentalism of the early 1900s) bequeathed us a divisiveness that goes contrary to Jesus' prayer that we all be one (John 17:20-21). In many ways this lack of unity has become as big an obstacle for people to come to know Jesus (as he said in John 17:23) as the Catholic scandals the Reformers rebelled against.

It all sounds a lot like the days we read about in the Bible. The miracle of God's grace is that God is still able to reach us in all of this. Often it is not because of us, but in spite of us.