

According to his biographers there was nothing in Ritschl himself to give the movement its popularity. Mohammedanism and some other religions were not only initiated but rendered successful by the marked personality of their founders; but Ritschl could lay no claim to intellectual superiority over many of his compeers, nor was he possessed of that magnetic force of character which attracts and sways men whether they will or not. He was not remarkable for amiability, but on the contrary was inclined to be rough and intolerant. Then, regarding his writings, so far from possessing charm they are described as being heavy and not unfrequently so obscure as to border on the unintelligible. Thus personality and literary skill must be ruled out as factors. Nor does the system of doctrine itself possess any charm, for even when expounded by clearer heads and more facile pens than those of Ritschl, it lacks a definite statement of the fundamental truths of the gospel, and is often provokingly hazy just at times when the reader desiderates clearness.

Nor, as has been said, can the doctrinal positions of Ritschlianism assert a right to novelty; for it would be difficult now in the exposition of Christianity to claim as the foundation of a new creed the discovery of some heretofore overlooked phase of truth. Ritschlianism does indeed assert that one of its distinguishing characteristics is making the person Christ and not the creed concerning Christ the object of faith. But this claim is by no means exclusive, for in Germany itself, pietists and mystics with whom Ritschl will have no fellowship, put in the foreground their personal relation to a Saviour; while everywhere evangelical churches, no matter how the fact is expressed, do not trust in dogma but in Christ himself. Besides, Ritschl does not profess to be an iconoclast. He does not assert that his mission is to demolish the church of his fathers and erect upon its ruins a structure more stable and fair. On the contrary, he professes that his work is that of a reformer who would recall to experiences which should never have been lost.

Scholars who have made the study of Ritschlianism a speciality, tell us that the popularity of the system is largely traceable to three causes. First, it never loses sight of the truth that Christianity is an intensely practical religion, coming into contact with every point of human life and thus producing rich experience. And closely connected with this practical estimate of religion is the professed rejection of the undue influence which metaphysics and philosophy would exercise in the formulation of religious opinion. And so far good. Religion if anything at all is practical—it does come into contact with our life and powerfully influence it; and while it willingly accepts when necessary the aid of a true metaphysic and a rational philosophy, it keeps them in their proper place, assigning them their work and prescribing them their bounds. Secondly, Ritschlianism whilst subjective in its operations, dealing largely with the so-called “value-judgments,” has no place for any emotional exhibition of the pietistic type, and it accords liberty in depreciating the claims of the supernatural. And, thirdly, very rarely in the history of the German churches has there been such zeal as in the propagation of this new faith. The attitude of its adherents is decidedly aggressive.